THE SHORN LAMB

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THE BODLEY HEAD

THE SHORN LAMB

by

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CHAPTER I

BROTHERTON DRAKE sat on the bed in the little hotel bedroom, threw his hat on the battered suit-case which the Boots as man-of-all-work had put on a chair, and stared about him, wondering what he should do next. It was a frowzy bedroom, ill-lit and unventilated; the wall-paper was stained, the strip of drugget threadbare, the cotton bed coverlet unclean; and through the small window nothing could be seen but the murk and smoke of a sullen London sky. From outside mounted the unceasing clatter of the street, dominated now and then by the thunder of a train across Waterloo railway bridge. The room smelled of newly fried fish and ancient perspiration. Brotherton Drake shrugged his shoulders and smiled ironically. What could you expect for three and sixpence? With breakfast. He had given up expecting much for a long time.

At any rate, such air as there was he would have, in spite of the cold. He threw up the rickety sash, and South London screamed and roared at him, not in welcome, but in derision. Did he think London would be outdone by New York in clamorous rejection of the unfit? If so, he was vastly mistaken. The Waterloo Bridge Road and York Road and their purlieus would soon teach him that New York was

not the sole agent for the Furies in this underworld.

Perhaps it was the all-enveloping sour smell that most offended him. For the last eight days he had breathed the pure Atlantic air, only descending to stuffy, third-class depths for food and sleep. He had landed at Southampton a few hours before, and, trudging with his suit-case from Waterloo Station, had just taken up his quarters at this unsavoury hotel: Private Hotel, with a card in the fanlight over the door announcing, "Bed and Breakfast 3/6."

The friend on board who had recommended it had said:

"I'd go there with you, Buddy, dear boy, if I hadn't to make Birmingham to-night. It isn't the Ritz, but the people are honest. I know them. Mention my name and all will be well."

He had flung a histrionic hand. Buddy Drake had envied him. He was coming home with a definite purpose. A definite engagement in a Birmingham production awaited him. His farewell at the station had been patronizing:

"If London won't have you, Buddy, dear boy, Birmingham will. Don Carey will see to that."

But whatever momentary hopes Buddy had founded on Don Carey vanished when he learned that his name was no password even to this dingy lodging-house, for it was entirely unknown.

Buddy sat down again on the bed and emptied his pockets. He had still a gold watch and chain—the watch given him many years ago by his father whom he held in humorous memory, the chain a gift from his wife, dead ten long years ago. He counted out his money: six pounds eight shillings and sevenpence. This, the watch and chain, the clothes he wore, the old suit-case and its inconsiderable contents comprised

the whole fortune, estate real and personal, of Brotherton Drake, son of Sir Michael Drake, Baronet, bred in the traditions of Winchester and King's College, Cambridge.

He passed his hand over his hair. It was light brown, thinning at the top. "Six pounds eight and seven divided by three and six. Oh, hell, I can't do it. What does it matter?"

He laughed. Caught up his hat. He would go down and get a drink. The thought coincided with the restoring of the gold watch to his pocket. The old man's watch. On such a turn of Fortune's wheel, the old man would have come to the same decision. He heard the jovial echo from the past:

"Why worry, my boy? Let's have a drink."

He descended the stairs to an evil-smelling and deserted den, labelled "Smoking-Room." The Boots, lounging round the entry, took his order for a whisky and soda. For once, he thought, he would have a drink in beautiful freedom. He laughed at the sudden thought of the matter-of-course liberty of an Englishman in England. Until that moment of his first drink in London, his Americanized sub-consciousness had not realized the astounding fact. You said to any myrmidon in any hostelry, "Bring me champagne, bring me brandy, bring me gin, bring me vodka, bring me Burgundy, bring me any damn kind of alcoholic liquor you've got," and there it was, of the best, set before you in public; and you drank it in public. And at public banquets the stentorian-voiced toastmaster behind the chair proclaimed openly:

"Mr. Chairman, My Lords and gentlemen, I pray you charge your glasses. The Toast is—The King."

And you sipped from glasses full of champagne that was real, free, laughing, bubbling. . . .

"Half the soda."

There it was, free, laughing, bubbling, sizzling. After all, perhaps it was worth while coming back to the old country.

Buddy Drake smacked his lips. Yes. It was different from the bootleg stuff of America. It had a mellow tang. It reminded him of old times. He had told the Boots to give him half the soda. He had instinctively obeyed the dictum of the old man—"My boy, when you see a fellow take half an inch of soda to his whisky, you may know that he's a drunkard. When he has his glass filled to the brim, you may know he's just a mere thirsty ass. The mean, as the Buddhists say, is the way of wisdom."

Poor dear old man! He had gone to God soon after Buddy had cast off Cambridge and all its works and gone into the War. Buddy looked at his watch. A quarter to six. It was a beast of a smoking-room, dismal and smelly, about nine feet by seven, with half a dozen cracked leather chairs, and a sulky fire glowering from an old-fashioned grate.

Anyhow, it was England again. England which he hadn't seen for eleven years. He was now thirty-six. He sipped his whisky and soda, a free man's drink in a free country. . . . Six pounds eight shillings and sevenpence! What kind of a damn fool had he been?

Was it the old man's fault? Who could tell? Who was he, of all men, to judge the dead? Anyhow, in the time past, he had been nearer to his father than his brother Atherton, the present holder of the title, Atherton, his twin brother, who had preceded him into the world.

The dear old man, rubicund, jolly, fox-hunting—woman-hunting, if it were permitted to say so—had heralded his advent into the world with a joke. His

mother, a colourless woman with a pride in ancestry, had decided that the coming child, if a boy, should be called Atherton. When another boy followed soon in the wake of the first, complications arose. The elder, naturally, was Atherton. But the younger, the perhaps unwanted, brother?

"Why, Brotherton, of course," said the jesting father.

"A very good name," said the lady. "There are some Shropshire Brothertons, I believe. A very old family."

Well, one name, in Sir Michael's opinion, was as good as another. To point out to his unhumorous wife that he had spoken flippantly would have been open offence, such as he could not dream of committing. His many offences against her he had kept most scrupulously covert.

It was an American friend who had given him his almost lifelong diminutive.

"What's this one's name, Michael?"

"Brotherton."

"Brotherton, hell. Come here, Buddy."

His mother's ears had never been shocked by the vulgar appellation. At the time—he was four years old—she was ailing. A few days later she was dead. His memories of her were vague. He retained an impression of a Pale Righteousness from whom he would fly to the never-failing glow of Unregeneracy that was his father.

Buddy Drake finished his whisky and ordered another. The old man would have done just the same. He laughed. Why was he thinking of all these things? The old man had been in his grave for many years. If he couldn't laugh he must weep a good deal. And of late years he had had enough to weep over. God! What a mess he had made of life!

There are men who make a mess of their lives with a whimsical deliberation. By an act of volition they shut their eyes and leap blindly into the Unknown, certain of thrill and sanguine of success. When they fall on their feet they are accounted heroes; when they break their necks the world regards them as mere and common fools. Buddy had never yet succeeded in breaking his neck, but he had suffered dislocations enough to qualify him for the latter category. When his father died he came into twenty thousand pounds, half the estate, for the twins shared equally under the will. What became of the money Buddy scarcely knew. With some of it he had a gaudy time for a couple of years or so. Some he gave away. There was Molly Desart and her two babies, for instance, with nothing but the pension of a captain's widow to live on. Billy Desart, who had been through tight places with him in the War and had been killed by his side, was his ideal of a soldier and a gentleman, a King of Men; and Molly, a V.A.D. nurse, with no visible means of support, was a dear. He had been best man at their war-wedding. Well, if a man wallowing in money couldn't set up a comrade's widow in the hat business, what was the good of him? And there were others whom he had helped. Then, some fool had urged him to gamble in foreign exchanges. At one period he was a multi-millionaire in Austrian kronen. A short while afterwards he found himself a pauper.

"If only you had taken my advice," said his wise brother, Atherton, "and followed my investments, you'd have doubled your capital. Why will you always play the fool?"

That was the history of the twin brothers. Atherton was wise, Brotherton foolish. Atherton left Eton with an open scholarship at Trinity, and spouted his Latin Prize Poem at Commem, with the air of one in

whom brilliant correctitude is but a normal quality. How Buddy managed to hang on half after half at the school was a miracle to his father, his brother, and himself. He afterwards realized that the Dark Powers in white ties were kindly souls not devoid of humour. In the middle of his inglorious Cambridge career the War broke out. He went to war. Atherton, a delicate youth with a weak heart, to whom violent physical exertion had always been forbidden, remained at home. While Buddy floundered in blood and mud, cursing the War, but secretly loving it, Atherton took a brilliant degree and walked straight into high politics as private secretary to a Minister. If the War had continued indefinitely he would have reached high office. As it was, he slipped into Parliament at a by-election and was given ministerial rank. Buddy came out of the War with an M.C. and a bullet through his body. Atherton used his twenty thousand pounds so shrewdly that, when Buddy came to him with his distressful story, he had already doubled his capital.

"If you had taken my advice . . ." he said.

It was then that Buddy, scornful of advice, took from his brother something far more important.

He took away his bride; bolted away with her on the night before the wedding, like Young Lochinvar.

Her name was Mona. She was adorable. Buddy adored her, but, honest soul, he had never told his love. What chance had he, obscure and almost penniless, against his brother, with his title, his distinction, his brilliant prospects? Not a dog's chance. But what happened?

A July night. A stuffy family party. A moonlit terrace, lawns and pale flowers and scents and still air and far-off, silent, and companionable elms. The two together for a breathing space; and nothing on the surface of his mind but the giving of a brotherly,

though wistful, benediction. And, gradually, the intent of their words, at first so innocent, grew in trembling significance, until, to his amazement, she broke out, in the bitter modern way:

"I'll stick it out with Atherton all right. But why wasn't it you?"

And the moon laughed and the stars danced and the elms swayed, and the summer night went reeling mad and the girl was in Buddy's arms.

An hour afterwards they were speeding away in Buddy's car, through Surrey lanes to London. A fortnight later they were in New York seeking their fortune.

Then six months of wild and wonderful rapture, and she was dead. The New York winter, a chance-caught cold, pneumonia—that was all the pitiful history.

That was ten years ago; and those ten years had been marked by nothing but disillusion and disappointments attendant on innumerable acts of lunacy.

Buddy was an instinctive actor. In the nursery, at school, at the University, in the Army (when behind the lines the weary would be at rest), his little talent had been his one claim to distinction. So, in New York, he went on the stage; and on the stage he remained during the unprofitable years. He travelled the length and breadth of the United States, playing all sorts of parts in all sorts of companies. He had even played Legree in "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Hollywood gave him a chance of fortune. He threw it away, and joined an old fellow-actor, last met some years before in Springfield, Ohio, in an illusory bootlegging business. His small savings were swallowed up; his car, full of dreadful liquor, was stopped by the police who kindly bade him clear out of Los Angeles

County as speedily as he could, while his unscathed friend and partner laughed sarcastically and lent him his fare to San Francisco.

That was the beginning of the end. At last New York again ; weary waiting among the drab and wistful crowd in agents' anterooms ; dreadful walking on Broadway till the soles of his shoes wore through.

He had the creased and crackled and hateful things on his feet now, as he sat by the dismal fire drinking his extravagant whisky and soda.

Presently he rose, straightened his worn tie in front of the once gilt-framed mirror over the mantelpiece, pulled his old jacket out of its folds, with the instinct of a man careful of personal appearance, and went out of the room in search of the telephone. He found it in a dark corner. After consulting a page in his pocket-book he put the necessary twopence in the slot and called a number.

A voice responded, " Hello."

" Is that Park 9857 ? "

" Yes, Sir Atherton. Bronson speaking."

Buddy gasped. He knew that he resembled his twin brother in looks, but had never realized a similarity of voice. He said :

" I'm not Sir Atherton, but his brother, Mr. Brotherton Drake. Is Sir Atherton in ? "

" No, sir. He's just gone out to dine at the Club."

" What Club ? "

" The Athenæum, sir."

" Oh ! " said Buddy. No institution less illustrious than the Athenæum would do for Atherton. He went on, " What time do you think he'd be at home ? "

" Before nine, sir," said the man's voice in a tone of conviction. " Sir Atherton's not been very well lately and has to keep early hours."

"Will you tell him then," said Buddy, "that I'll come along a little after nine."

"It's Mrs. Bronson's and my night out, sir, and we'll have gone before he comes in. But if you ring him up at the Athenæum——"

"I'll do that," said Buddy. "Good night."

"Good night, sir."

Bronson. . . . Bronson. . . . His mind groped back through the years. Good God! Yes, there had been an efficient young butler called Bronson, at home, in his father's house. Atherton had kept him on, regardful of family traditions.

Buddy went back to his comfortless den and meditated on the imperturbability of English butlers. In spite of a ten-year absence and of family upheavals, Bronson had taken him as though he were his brother's daily visitor. If he had said, "Tell Sir Atherton I'm down and out, starving, in the gutter," Bronson would have replied, "Certainly, sir, I'll tell Sir Atherton."

That, however, was what he himself must tell his brother. It was an unpleasant business. But it couldn't be helped. As his long since defunct friend, Maître François Villon, had remarked, "Hunger drives the wolves abroad."

After all, he wasn't much of a wolf. He had never asked Atherton for a penny in his life. All he wanted was a loan—say of a hundred pounds—to put him on his feet, decently shod feet, for instance, so that he could seek work with some prospect of success. Atherton's reception and manner might not signify enthusiastic welcome. By running off with his bride he had played him as scurvy a trick as one man might play another. But that was a long time ago, and a twin brother is a twin brother; and to a man with a flat in Park Lane and a place in the country and a perfect manservant (probably also a more perfect woman

servant—cook ?—in the unknown Mrs. Bronson), a hundred pounds would be the most trivial of sums.

Should he ring up the Athenæum ? No. Atherton might ask him to dinner. He took in his shabbiness at a glance. The place would be chock-full of Bishops and Cabinet Ministers. A daw could not consort with such peacocks. Besides, it would be rough on Atherton. The best and kindliest of men have their inviolable vanities.

CHAPTER II

THE hall was carpeted, steam-heated; plants in tubs, discreetly set in quiet corners, and shaded electric lamps gave an impression of home and comfort. The liveried lift-man had the air of a family retainer. While he was ascending in the tastefully appointed and leisurely lift, Buddy was smitten by the sense of long-lost, far-off, beautiful things that had once been part and parcel of his life; and suddenly the sense became transformed into an aching and a hopeless hunger.

The lift-man said, as they were going up:

"I beg pardon, sir, but when I saw you I was struck all of a heap. If I'd not taken Sir Atherton up ten minutes ago in evening dress, I'd have thought you was him, sir."

Buddy smiled pleasantly.

"I'm his twin brother."

"It's marvellous, the resemblance, if you'll pardon my saying so." The lift stopped. He opened the door, crossed the carpeted corridor and pressed an electric button. "Here, sir."

He entered his cage and disappeared downwards. After a short while, the flat door opened and Buddy came face to face with his own image.

The image started back.

"Good God!"

"Yes, my dear fellow, it's me. Buddy. I'm back again."

"Come in," said Sir Atherton. And when the door had closed behind Buddy he faced him in the hall. "You're the very last human being I should have expected."

"You're not very pleased to see me," said Buddy.

The other raised a hand.

"It's a shock, I admit. You must give me a minute or two to get over it." He walked a pace or two and threw open a door. "Come in and sit down," he said.

"At any rate," said Buddy with a laugh, "you can see I'm not an impostor."

"That's true," said Atherton.

"In fact," said Buddy, when they had entered the room, "it seems that we're more alike than ever. In the old days I was robust and heavy, and you were never very fit. Now, I suppose I've lost weight."

Atherton looked at his scarecrow double and remarked coldly, motioning him into a seat:

"And a lot of other things, apparently. What have you come for? Help? Money?"

Buddy took a cigarette from a silver box.

"Always sagacious, my dear Atherton."

"Suppose I don't give you help or money?"

Buddy shrugged his shoulders; then, after a second or two, meeting hard and suspicious eyes, he answered:

"I'll not blackmail you in any way, on the strength of our resemblance."

A flush rose on the other's sallow cheeks.

"I wasn't thinking of such a thing."

"I'm not so sure. Anyhow, you'd be more or less justified. I look pretty tough, don't I?"

He gazed around the mellow, luxuriously-furnished room—a library, book-lined, hung with good prints, heavily curtained, warm, intimate, wealthy. A fire of fantastic extravagance flamed in the grate. A

wide, modern writing-table lit by shaded lamps gleamed with the silver of accessories. A curved mahogany typewriter case gave it a serious and business-like air. In a corner stood a vase of great golden chrysanthemums. How many years was it since he had inhabited a room with flowers in it? He drank in all these things that had once been his, his lost heritage, with eyes and soul athirst. He glanced at his silent sphinx of a brother, cold, reserved, clean in the dinner-kit of his respectable civilization.

"You've always been the wise one and I've been the fool."

"Possibly."

"And you never suffered fools gladly."

Atherton waved a vague hand of acquiescence. Buddy rose and touched his shoulder.

"I've not come here to talk rot and false sentiment. But I don't see how you and I can meet, like this, without feeling something. Old times—the dear old man—this damn funny twin bond between us."

The other edged away from his touch.

"I think the less said of old times and bonds, the better. You went your way. I went mine. Let us come down to facts. What is your present position?"

Buddy laughed and showed his dilapidated shoes. His position? Soon it would be at a street corner, or outside the queue of a theatre pit, while he played the ukelele. He was rather good on the ukelele. Unfortunately he had pawned his instrument a month ago in New York.

"Have you ever pawned anything, Atherton?"

Atherton flashed him a queer glance and, instead of answering the ironical question, asked him if he would have a drink. The things were set out on a table by the wall—decanters and siphon and glass.

"Will you help yourself?"

Buddy crossed the room. "And you?"

"Not for me. I've had my allowance, a glass of port, at the Club. Doctor's orders."

Buddy came back with his drink.

"What's the matter? Same old heart?"

"Same old heart. Much worse, though."

"I'm sorry, old man," said Buddy sincerely. "It's awful rough luck. You with all your success, and—and the world at your feet——"

Atherton's fingers drummed nervously on the arm of his chair.

"Yes, yes! But there's no need to talk about me. You want money? How much?"

"If you could lend me a hundred pounds——"

"I can do that," said Atherton.

He went over to his writing-table and, taking his cheque-book from a drawer, which he unlocked with a key attached to a chain-hung bunch, made out the cheque and tore it from the stub. The book he relocked in the drawer. The cheque he left on the table.

"That," he said, rising, "ought to keep you from present starvation and give you a fresh start. Make the most of it, for it's the last you'll ever get from me."

"If that's your line, you can keep your money," said Buddy, with a flash of anger.

"What line did you expect me to take with you?"

"I thought perhaps bygones might be bygones. God knows they were tragic enough." Buddy paused, and met his brother's eyes fixed on him in cold hatred. He went on: "I thought perhaps you might have—well, not forgotten, but forgiven. I know I treated you badly—damnably—but I couldn't help it. Neither could she. You didn't love her. How the devil could a cold fish like you love anybody?

She didn't love you. When we bolted you suffered in your vanity. Yes, I know, it was a nasty jar. You looked an utter perfect damn fool. I know what you felt. It was awful, I admit. But, as I say, you suffered in your vanity. When she died I suffered in my soul. Suffering you can't conceive. At any rate, as far as that's concerned, we're quits."

Atherton passed his hand over his thinning brown hair in a manner so like Buddy's habitual gesture that the latter was startled.

"You'd better take the cheque and go. I've had about as much as I can stand."

He looked very white and pinched all of a sudden, and Buddy felt a surge of pity for the sick man. He made another appeal:

"I'm sorry I can't. Don't you see? If you'd just bury the hatchet—it would be all right. I'd take the money and be grateful. You and I are the only two left. I don't suppose you see any more of Mother's folks than I did. I've done all sorts of rotten things in my life—but I've really played the game."

"Yes. Football, cricket, the Army. Mona too, eh?"

"Can't death make things sacred between us, old chap? Wipe them out, as it were?"

Atherton sank wearily into a chair and covered his face with his hands. Buddy mechanically finished his drink and lit a cigarette. He was possessed by an absurd longing to strike some chord of affection in this twin image of himself. He said in a low and appealing tone:

"What can I do, old man?"

The other took his hands from his eyes and hunched his shoulders.

"I don't know. It's all so sudden. Perhaps I've

misjudged you. I thought you were—never mind what I thought. . . . Anyhow, I've hated you all my life. You had things I could never hope to have. I may be wrong, I'll have to think it over."

He rose and went to the table and took up the cheque, and his lips curled in a faint smile.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't take it. Perhaps you'll get what you want with it and come and see me to-morrow afternoon. Will you?"

"Of course," said Buddy.

"My servants are out to-night. But I ought to warn you—Bronson is still with me. Do you remember Bronson?"

Buddy repeated the telephone conversation.

"He took my voice for yours," he said.

He turned to the side table and helped himself to another drink. Sketching a pledge with the glass, he became aware of an expression of disapproving inquiry on his brother's face. He answered it carelessly:

"I suppose so. I never heard of a down-and-out who was a confirmed teetotaller. And liquor in America is really a rich man's hobby. When one begins to drink beyond one's means. . . . Well. Here's luck."

"You'd better give it up," said Atherton, "if you can't exercise self-control."

Buddy laughed. "You haven't changed. You still talk like Ernest in 'The Swiss Family Robinson.' I wonder what you've got out of life."

"And what have you got?"

"As much fun as I could find money to pay for. My God, if I had your money and my experience!"

He laughed again, rather loudly; then suddenly checked himself. He realized the possibility of his being affected by the liquor he had drunk, without food, since his arrival at Waterloo. Also Atherton

had risen from his chair, and was confronting him, with suspicion and hate in his eyes.

"My money! So that's what you've come for, is it? You heard I was a crock and thought you'd be in at the death——"

"You're crazy, man," cried Buddy.

"A minute or so ago I was fool enough to weaken —to begin to wonder whether after all I was wrong. But I'm not. You're the same hypocritical, drunken wastrel you've always been. I was ass enough to think I might change my will—— Oh yes, I've made my will. And not a penny for you. Damn you. Coming here like a vulture——"

Buddy caught him by the shoulder.

"Stop, you fool," he shouted. "I wouldn't touch your money. Here's your beastly cheque."

He threw it on the ground, and made for the door. His hand was on the knob, when he heard a thud behind him and, swerving round, saw his brother a huddled heap on the floor, the cheque within an inch of the fingers of an outstretched hand.

After a few moments Buddy rose from his knees. Heart and pulse had stopped beating. Atherton was dead. He had learnt enough during the far-off four years of war to know when a man was dead or alive. Atherton was dead.

He drew the body into a seemly posture and fetched a cushion for the head. He stood, staring down.

What should he do? The servants were out. A doctor? He had not been in London for ten years and knew not the whereabouts of any doctor. He must go out to the landing and summon the lift-man.

He bent down again. There was no doubt. Atherton was dead. The lift-man was the only ready help.

Atherton's body lay on the edge of the hearth-rug, between the back of the writing-table and the fire.

Over the mantelpiece was a mirror. By chance Buddy caught sight of his own face, as pale and drawn as that of the man on the ground, and shudderingly identical with it. He himself might be lying there—dead.

The flash of a wild idea stunned him for a moment, like an electric current of high voltage. He stood gaping down at the dead man—his own image. The two were indistinguishable one from the other, alike in build, feature, voice—even in the thinning brown hair. Recovering from the shock of the idea, he wrestled with the fantastic temptation. Why not? He had nothing to lose. All to gain. It would be the maddest adventure even in his absurd life of a thousand chances. Wealth and ease could be his in a few minutes, and to retain them only a matter of luck and mother wit.

He had done his best to make peace with Atherton. Atherton would have none of it; he had turned the twin-brotherly bond into a tie of hatred. There was no sacrilegious betrayal of affection in that which he was tempted to do.

It was done with an agonized exhilaration of speed. At any moment the servants might return. And he was aware of the supreme legal importance of the exact hour of sudden death. It was a task where nerve-racking horror gripped him only when half-way through. It presented strange difficulties, almost impossibilities, that he had not foreseen. The room became alive with the threat of approaching witnesses. The falling of coals in the grate made him start in awful apprehension.

At last, after desperate physical exertion, the new Sir Atherton Drake wiped the sweat from his brow and looked down on his dead and disreputable self. He had been thorough. Even the cheque he had placed in the old letter-case now in the breast pocket

of the man on the floor. He took another shot of whisky to steady his nerves. There was no danger now of muddling his brain. Never had it been so clear.

Incongruously there came to him the livid memory of the night after Mona's funeral. It was the first night at a Repertory Theatre in New York of "Arms and the Man." He was playing Bluntschli. His future, as it seemed, depended on his performance. He had strung himself up with whisky until he felt like a god of infinite clarity of mind and masterfulness of will. The press had acclaimed his triumph.

If he couldn't act in the grand manner, what in the name of God could he do? He was thrilled by the sense that he was playing a part greater than man had played before.

He went out and, crossing the carpeted strip of landing, pressed the lift-button. Immediately afterwards the jangling vibration told him of the lift's ascent. The gates swung open. The lift-man, seeing him bareheaded, in evening dress, queried:

"Yes, Sir Atherton?"

Buddy beckoned him across the landing to the open door of the flat.

"My brother—you brought him up, I think, about an hour ago. Bronson and his wife are out. He's dead. A heart-attack, I think. I don't quite know what to do."

The lift-man followed Buddy into the library and saw lying on the floor the dead body of the remembered brother of Sir Atherton Drake.

"Have you rung up the doctor, Sir Atherton?"

"Not yet," said Buddy, sinking in a chair. "I sent for you first. It has been a great shock. I wish you'd do it for me, like a good fellow."

"Dr. Selous, isn't it, sir?"

"Of course," said Buddy.

Selous, Selous. He must remember the name. He marvelled at the quiet efficiency of London servants. He did not reflect that any lift-man would have been an incurious fool who remained in ignorance of the names and qualifications of constant visitors to his tenants.

The lift-man turned up the doctor's number in the telephone book and called for it through the instrument on the writing-table.

"Hello. . . . Dr. Selous? Is the doctor in?" He turned to Buddy. "Yes, Sir Atherton?"

"I'll come to the telephone," said Buddy.

He conversed with the doctor. Told his simple story. His voice was unquestioned. Dr. Selous would come round at once.

"I'm afraid I must go and attend to the lift," said the lift-man.

Buddy nodded and thanked him, and when he had left, his eyes scanned the open page of the telephone book. There was the reference: "Charles Selous, M.D., 219 Harley Street." A taxi would bring him to Park Lane in five or ten minutes. These must be employed in exploring the flat.

He found the arrangements much as he expected. There was a little sitting-room which in a married household would have been the library, and the present library a drawing-room. There was a large and pleasant dining-room. There was a large bedroom, obviously Atherton's, with adjacent bathroom. Across a passage were a couple of bedrooms furnished with perfunctory formality, and obviously seldom or never used, with a bath-room between. Beyond were the kitchen and servants' quarters. In the master's domain there was no sign of feminine intrusion. On regaining the library he became con-

scious that the note struck in the room was one of austere and unimaginative bodily comfort.

He looked around at the pictures. They were all fine mezzotints and steel engravings, portraits of men, Lord Peel, the Earl of Aberdeen—excellent of their kind, but uninspiring.

The door of a cabinet next the fireplace stood ajar. For the sake of occupying the long and anxious moments before the doctor's arrival, rather than from curiosity, he opened it. It contained an orderly mass of printed papers, and one little medicine-phial. This he examined: "The Drops. Three in a wine-glassful of water, when needed." Evidently kept there, ready to hand, in case of a heart attack. As he held it, his glance fell on a wineglass set beside the decanters and the siphon on the silver tray. He remembered wondering, earlier in the evening, what the silly glass was for, wondering vaguely whether the precise Atherton used it as a measure for the whisky which should go to a drink. Now he saw its purpose.

A sudden thought flashed through his brain. He himself, in the eyes of the doctor and his servants, would be a sufferer from some heart trouble, something ending in "-carditis"; he who was as tough and sound as any Marathon runner. He stood aghast at the idea. The part he had set himself to play was beginning to present unforeseen difficulties. Yet he must play it.

He had just poured a drop of the red liquid into the wineglass and squirted into it a dash of soda-water, when the door-bell rang.

He admitted a fresh-faced, kindly man who beamed at him through gold-rimmed spectacles.

"My dear fellow, this is a dreadful thing," he said, taking off his overcoat. "Tell me all about it."

"There's nothing much to tell," replied Buddy nervously, feeling as though he were speaking his opening lines before an uncertain audience. "It's my twin brother whom I hadn't seen or heard of for ten years. He came unexpectedly, dead-broke and ill and asked me for assistance. I did what I could, and then suddenly he fell down"—he snapped his fingers—"just like that. You can't do anything, of course. The poor fellow is dead; but I had to send for you."

"Naturally. Where is he?"

"In the library. I'm all alone. Bronson and his wife are out."

He opened the door for the doctor, who strode in and uncovered the face of the dead man.

"My God!" he cried, leaping back.

"Yes," said Buddy, "there was a strange resemblance between us."

"Resemblance? You were almost identical."

The doctor bent down and made his examination. Yes. The family trouble. His father, Sir Michael, had died of it.

"You had no knowledge of it, Drake?"

"None. He seemed strong enough when I saw him last. But, as I say, that was years ago."

They went over the ground, as men will, for a few minutes.

"There's really nothing to be done—from my point of view," said Dr. Selous, "except the sad, dreary formalities. I'll help you through them as far as I can."

"You were always the kindest of men," said Buddy.

The doctor laughed off the tribute.

"It's you that I'm concerned about. This must have been a horrible shock. How are you feeling?"

"I was upset, of course. But I came through it better than I should have thought possible."

The doctor's eye fell on the phial and the wine-glass with its pink residue of dose, and he waved a hand towards them.

"Quite right in the circumstances, but don't overdo it."

Buddy gave him the necessary assurance. He wasn't going to stimulate a perfectly sound heart. He had a nervous dread lest his genial friend and doctor should pull out a stethoscope there and then and insist on auscultation.

They talked for a while and then the door opened and a middle-aged man appeared, clad in the dark-grey tweed out-of-doors suit of the well-to-do serving man. He stood in the doorway.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Atherton. I thought——"

"Come in, Bronson," said Buddy, "I want you."

CHAPTER III

THE early nightmare was over. Dr. Selous had long since gone. Bronson's wife, a woman, apparently, of all the efficiencies, had taken charge of reverential rites. Sir Atherton Drake, sixth baronet—to all the world, henceforward, Brotherton Drake—lay in everlasting peace, on the bed in one of the calm and cold spare-rooms. Everything had been done in decency and order. And Brotherton, *alias* Buddy Drake to all the world, henceforward, Sir Atherton Drake—sixth baronet—sat before the library fire, half stupefied by the happenings of the past few hours.

It was three o'clock in the morning. He had sat there, goodness knew how long. Mrs. Bronson had asked whether she should sit up in the death-chamber. He had forbidden such sacrifice. He himself would keep vigil. He had dismissed her.

He had gone alone into the room and gazed down on the inscrutably serene features of his counterpart, seeking in them he scarce knew what. By all the traditions, by nearly all precedents, he and the dead man should have been knit together in the closest bonds of sympathy and affection. Yet all their lives they had lived apart, almost labelled "The Good Twin" and "The Bad Twin"; and the ways of each had been incomprehensible to the other. He had shivered in the room, bare as a sepulchre. The clothes that the dead man had worn were nowhere

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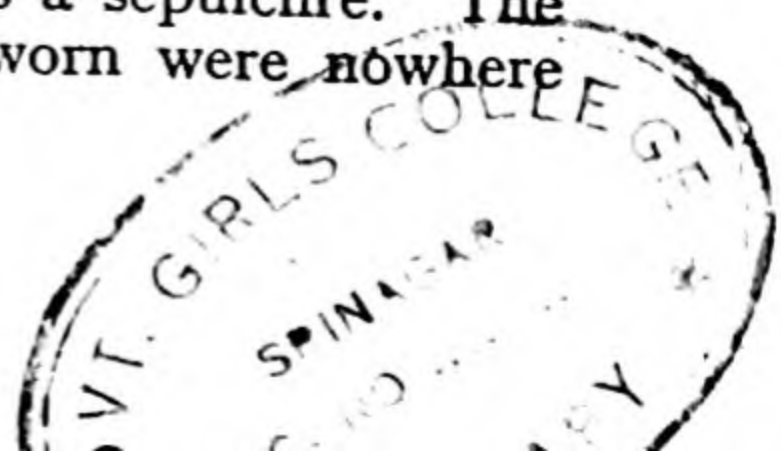


visible. Mrs. Bronson had taken them decently away. The contents of the pockets she had brought into the library. There they lay, in a pitiful heap, on the writing-table.

Buddy rose, and put some coals on the fire. They seemed to be unreal coals and an unreal fire. He himself, clad in unreal garments, seemed to be waiting, as in some fantastic station waiting-room, for an unreal train to come in and take him anywhither. It scarcely occurred to him to go to bed. His brain shrank from formulating the significance of what he had so crazily and desperately done. He had only the intense consciousness of the death of his own past and the assumption of a past but vaguely known, and of a double and bewildering present. Through that consciousness ran the thrill of a future assured from the hopeless poverty of the past few years, which but a few hours ago had seemed the portion appointed for the rest of his life.

His conscience pricked him now and then. In assuming Atherton's personality was he doing him a second great wrong? In what way? Was he robbing Atherton's heirs? Impossible. Atherton had neither chick nor child. Would he be injuring his good name? With the chance provided him, Buddy could live as clean and honourable a life as any man. Was he posing before society as a man of bogus title?

It was only at this point of his reflections that the grotesque humour of the situation occurred to him.

In spite of all the solemnities he had to break into half-hysterical laughter. By his brother's death the baronetcy devolved automatically on himself. Until he died he would be indubitably Sir Brotherton Drake, seventh baronet.

He was stealing no title. Rather giving one away ; an action more or less evocative of conscious virtue. In any case, whether he were Sir Atherton or Sir Brotherton, what did it matter ? As Sir Brotherton he would be penniless ; as Sir Atherton he could enter into the enjoyment of Atherton's fortune.

Eventually he fell asleep in an arm-chair before the fire.

The servants awakened him at dawn and brought him tea. Bronson prepared a bath, and set clothes for the day, a dark suit and a black tie. At eight he breakfasted. Later came a discreet man, with necessary papers to be filled up, and a notebook for the entering of instructions. There was a family vault in a Hampshire churchyard, where, with many other departed Drakes, his father and mother lay. His father had been the last squire of the place, house and lands having been sold to pay off the mortgages and innumerable debts of the notorious though genial evil liver.

Atherton should lie with his fathers, said Buddy. He would be the sole mourner ; for, as far as he knew, his brother had no friends in England. The discreet man undertook all the necessary arrangements. Buddy breathed more freely when he had gone.

Presently Dr. Selous ran in, on an anxious flying visit, and counselled the removal of his brother's poor remains to a mortuary. The undertaker ought to have suggested it. Buddy shivered at the thought. Atherton must remain in his own place till the end.

" No, no," he said, " it goes against the grain."

" Then you must clear out. Staying here will get on your nerves. It can't do any good, and your nerves will do your heart a devil of a lot of harm.

Go down to Newstead for a day or two, and take the car over from there to Hillthorpe for the funeral."

Now Newstead was Atherton's little country-place —somewhere in Hampshire. What it was like, what set of servants ran it, Buddy didn't know. A copy of "Who's Who" ferreted out of a New York Public Library had given him practically all his information about Atherton.

He put aside the suggestion. Newstead was too far. Look at the November rain. No.

"Perhaps as well," said the doctor. "By the way, how's the neuritis?"

He touched Buddy's arm and Buddy replied vaguely:

"About the same."

"Anyhow, don't sleep here," said the doctor. "Take a room at an hotel—Claridge's—or the Club."

"That's a much better idea," cried Buddy. "I'll sleep out."

The advice coincided with his own impulses. He couldn't be easy master of the house while Atherton was still there. Except for the sleep of sheer fatigue, as on the preceding night, he couldn't sleep at peace in the usurped bed. There were some cynical aspects of his position which revolted him.

On the other hand, the suggestion of a bed at the Athenæum tickled his sense of humour. He had all kinds of astonishing facts to realize. He, Buddy Drake, professional pariah, all of whose worldly goods were lying in an unspeakable bedroom off Waterloo Station, was a member of the Athenæum, and could avail himself of all its august and solemn privileges. But he did not feel equal yet to the ordeal of meeting the strange faces of men to whom he was intimately familiar. Fancy entering the lobby or entrance hall,

and being clapped on the back by an earnest fellow, reeking of brains and prosperity, and asked :

"Ah, my dear Sir Atherton, you're the very man I wanted to meet. You can tell me all about this new movement. . . ."

No, he must walk slowly and warily. Although his resemblance to Atherton was perfect enough to deceive Selous, the Bronsons and the lift-man—and presumably anyone of Atherton's acquaintance—yet there were a million opportunities for him to give himself hopelessly away. The more he considered the consequences of his lunatic action, the more formidable appeared this elementary danger. By signing the papers which the dreadful man had brought him that morning he had falsified registers, committed a dreadful offence and had placed himself henceforward in peril of his personal liberty.

"Luncheon is ready, Sir Atherton," said Bronson.

There was an omelette, light and golden ; there were cutlets that melted in the mouth ; there was a rich veined Stilton and a glass of port such as men like Bronson pour out with reverence. Even one more such meal, thought Buddy, would compensate for a year's skilly in prison.

When Bronson brought in the coffee, Buddy said :

"Dr. Selous doesn't want me to sleep here—until things are over. You understand, Bronson."

"Perfectly, Sir Atherton."

"So get me a room at Claridge's, and put up what I need. I'll go out before dinner."

"I think it's the best thing you can do, Sir Atherton," said the old servant.

When Bronson had gone, the echo of his words came back to his ear, and with them came back his youth of careless comfort—when he had said to the manservant of the time, perhaps Bronson himself :

"Put up my things for the week-end. In case I'm hoicked off to church, stick in a morning-coat."

In ways like this, he was but returning to his own kingdom.

Atherton Drake was one of those men who chain themselves to a bunch of keys. Buddy, who couldn't chain himself to anything, had always regarded keys as forces malignantly inimical. No sooner had they turned locks than they either broke the mechanism or they vanished. For years Buddy had not possessed a key. He believed in the simplification of life. But now he had been chained by Bronson to Atherton's bunch; and what they opened he knew not.

One thing, however, must be opened, and that was the drawers of the writing-table. They must contain information essential to the understanding of Atherton's affairs. As yet he knew nothing about them. Suddenly confronted by this blank wall of ignorance, he stood aghast. For a few moments he cursed his act of insanity, now practically irremediable. He was floundering into a misty morass, with pitfalls at every step. What did he know of the Elijah whose mantle he had so crazily usurped? Little more than nothing. Yet that little was accurate, since it comprised the facts originally drafted by Atherton himself, and edited by him, edition after edition, in "Who's Who." Buddy had copied it in New York and the sheet of paper was in his old letter-case; the most useless of documents, by the way, at the present moment, seeing that the fat red current volume of the book stood on the writing-table in company with other works of reference: Whitaker's Almanack, the Statesman's Year Book, the Post Office Guide, and Bradshaw. He turned up the name in "Who's Who"—an edition a year later than the one he had con-

sulted in New York—and found the same information.

Atherton had retired from politics, having been beaten in the last General Election, up to which time he had held minor office in Coalition and Conservative Governments. He had published three or four scholarly books : " The Sociology of Periclean Athens," " Longinus and his Epoch." . . . Buddy's comments on this bibliography were modern, succinct and profane. Who the hell was Longinus ?

This, after all, was by the way. Until he opened those drawers the essential problem would remain unsolved : How did Atherton earn his living ? How, with a patrimony equal to his own, twenty thousand pounds in cash, had he managed to lead a life of luxury, keeping up this flat in Park Lane, and a place in the country—" Newstead Park, Newstead, Hampshire," so please you—according to " Who's Who " ? The salaries of Parliamentary Secretaries are modest : the stipend, honorarium, or whatever it is called, of four hundred a year as Member of Parliament is frittered away, in a constituency, on appeals for funds by every conceivable charity : The Broken-Winded New Forest Trombone Players' Benevolent Society ; the Hampshire Unexpectant Mothers' League—Buddy thought he knew all about it. Anyhow, there was no money to be made out of English politics. Also books about ancient Greek epochs couldn't possibly be best sellers. The twenty-line paragraph gave no hint of interest in commercial pursuits. The problem remained. How the devil did the fellow make his money ?

Well, there was a bunch of keys, and there was a set of half a dozen locked drawers.

It was just after lunch. He rang for Bronson and gave his orders. To personal callers and telephone

callers he was out. Bronson might receive messages and deliver them when summoned. His privacy for the rest of the afternoon must be inviolate.

"Yes, Sir Atherton; but, pardon me, Sir Atherton, if Mrs. Flower should ring up?"

"I don't care whether it's the Queen of Rumania or Joan of Arc," cried Buddy, "I'm not in."

"Yes, Sir Atherton," said Bronson in a flat voice.

He went out, but the flatness of the tone struck Buddy's sensitive ear. He had made a mistake. The correct Atherton wouldn't have dragged in Joan of Arc. And who, in the name of the Fantastic, was Mrs. Flower? That didn't matter. The immediate future offered him a surfeit of food for speculation.

He found the key and opened the drawer from which Atherton had taken the cheque-book on the previous evening. It contained also a bank pass-book, a set of passed cheques held together by a rubber band, and neatly docketed bundles of correspondence. The pass-book showed a credit balance of over five thousand pounds. The entries on the credit side were mainly those of dividends on investments. Here and there as he turned over the pages appeared cash entries of large sums. The debit side also showed payments of large amounts. On reference to the cancelled cheques, he found that the payments were made to Messrs. Burton, Thane and Co, of Throgmorton Street, and a casual glance at a set of docketed letters informed him that the latter were Atherton's stockbrokers.

He opened the other drawers, and found many interesting documents. One dated a few weeks back was an autograph list of investments with the current market price attached. The total value was £198,000.

Buddy blinked at the figures and, deciding that such a revelation could not be endured unalcoholically,

rose and crossed to the electric bell. There he halted, paralysed by a thought. It could not possibly be in accord with Atherton's habits to ring for whisky and soda in the middle of the afternoon. He relaxed and sighed. If women must suffer to be beautiful, so men must suffer to be rich. He resigned himself to suffering and went back to the table.

He went through tidy masses of correspondence. Some of it related to the upkeep of Newstead Park; some of it to financial transactions in which his vagabond mind groped blindly; some of it was couched in equally unintelligible legal phraseology.

The most startling find was a fourfold parchment document, heavily engraved in black ink, which purported to be the Last Will and Testament of Sir Atherton Drake, Baronet. It was dated about a year before. Buddy opened it with shaky fingers. Atherton was dead. His estate belonged to his beneficiaries. Buddy felt physically sick. It hadn't occurred to him that he was committing fraud on a colossal scale. His dreams of wealth vanished, like those of the gentleman in " The Arabian Nights " who kicked over his basket. His vagrant life had so inured him to thinking only ten minutes ahead of the present moment that, at the mad moment of substitution of identity, he had had but that brief span of time in his mind. Even last night and this morning, he had not thought very lucidly ahead. Atherton had warned him that by will he would inherit nothing. Atherton had rubbed in the conception of a will, a conception as remote from Buddy's mentality as that of making a railway from Pole to Pole.

Had Atherton died without pronouncing the fatal words, he would not have dreamed of impersonation, being assured in his simplicity that he would inherit his brother's estate.

And now he handled the cold calf-skin document. To the touch it conveyed the clamminess of death. He could scarcely dare unfold it. But he must.

Disentangled from legal verbiage, the following testamentary dispositions grew clear to his astounded mind :

Three hundred a year for life to his manservant, Augustus Bronson.

Newstead Park and a capital sustentation fund of £50,000 to be administered by Trustees nominated by Trinity College, Cambridge, for the maintenance of an Academia of Scholars devoted to the study of Platonic Philosophy.

To Miss Cora Blenkinsop of 34 Turtle Road, Ealing, £7000.

To Edgar Fry, his sole executor, £2000.

The entire residue of his estate to the funds of the Conservative Party.

This precious document had been drawn up by Messrs. Fry, Bilson and Fry, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, Atherton's solicitors, as Buddy had gathered from other correspondence.

He pencilled the salient points on a bit of paper, after reading the thing through several times. Then, when he had finally grasped its significance—for, as he had muttered, " There must be some ghastly catch in it, somewhere "—he broke into the foolish, hysterical laughter of reaction.

The funds of the Conservative Party. What did he care about the Conservative Party ? Was it a widow or an orphan or a poor devil down on his luck ? No. To hell with the Conservative Party. It was splitting with money like an overfried sausage.

The Newstead Park Academia ? Plato ? Buddy

had dim memories of fifth-form school-days—certainly not from war-interrupted Cambridge days—of the Academy of Florence and Lorenzo de' Medici and the fugitive Greeks from Byzantium and groves of Platonic philosophy—whatever groves and Platonic philosophy might mean. Newstead Park, a kind of sanatorium for brainy ebriates who should pass their lives in futile study of the mildewed theories of thousands of years ago—Buddy had no scholar's appreciation of a millennium or two—the idea was insane! The projected Platonic Academy could accompany the Conservative Party to whatever Fahrenheit temperature of Inferno might suit their respective tastes.

Bronson—he himself could make things right with Bronson—to say nothing of his wife whom Atherton seemed to have forgotten.

Two thousand pounds to Fry. He passed it over for the time being.

There remained the seven thousand to Cora Blenkinsop. She was an Enigma. Certainly she had nothing to do with the Family. And she lived in Turtle Road, Ealing—a far cry from the Platonic Academia of Newstead Park. His unregenerate mind leaped at the incongruity. Before his eyes flashed the headlines of an American newspaper:

"Platonic home of Cora in Turtle Road."

"Good Lord," said Buddy, "I wonder if the poor old chap was human after all."

He considered the question soberly. He owed this woman, whoever she was, £7000. Thus, as far as he could see, his liabilities as the usurper of Sir Atherton Drake's fortune amounted to nine thousand pounds plus three hundred a year to Bronson.

He lay back in his leather-covered library chair, his thumbs in waistcoat armholes in a satisfied contemplation of the Universe. A sentence whose origin

is lost in the mists of Renaissance theologians occurred to his mind, " God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb."

Buddy rose and stared into the great library fire. There was something in the saying, something blessedly profound and true. If ever there had been a shorn lamb, he was one. He had been on the point of perishing from the icy blasts of a beastly world, when, all of a sudden, owing to a providential turn round a God-established corner, the wind was tempered, and here he was, a comfortably warm lamb, luxuriously sheltered.

He pressed an electric button. He would put his shelter to the test. On the appearance of Bronson, he said, with his actor's note and gesture :

" I'm feeling a little bit . . . er . . . I think a little brandy . . . "

Bronson stepped forward with an air of concern.

" Some of the old liqueur brandy or a brandy and soda, Sir Atherton ? "

Buddy chose the latter, and presently Bronson brought it in on a salver. Buddy breathed more freely ; he was not outraging the Atherton tradition. He felt more sheltered than ever.

The next discovery was of solid value : some hundred and fifty pounds in notes in a discreetly hidden drawer, which had its own special key. That would enable him to carry on for a while, until he could find a solution to the greatest of all practical problems. For the first time in his life of unreflection it occurred to him that wealth in this modern world was guarded not by strong-rooms and bolts and bars, but by that individual scrawl on a bit of paper, which is a man's signature. Except for this lucky find he could not extract a penny from his usurped estate without writing on a bit of paper the words " Atherton Drake," in the late Atherton Drake's handwriting.

Suddenly he remembered Selous's query that morning, "How's the neuritis?" It suggested all kinds of possibilities. He would cultivate that neuritis for all it was worth. How could a man write properly with his fingers all stiffened into sticks? To the shorn lamb there was the breath of summer in the wind.

Atherton's car—*his* car—took him later to the dreadful hotel where he had engaged his room the day before. The dingy proprietor showed no astonishment at his spruce transformation. He paid his bill, the Boots put his old suit-case into the car, and he drove away. He drove to Claridge's, where the hall staff greeted him by name and expressed pleasure at seeing him once more. The contrast in the two hostelries was grotesque in its vastness. He laughed all the way up in the lift.

In his comfortable suite he found the attendant Bronson. What would he wear? Tails or dinner-jacket? Buddy, in democratic America, had not worn a dress-suit for years. His heart suddenly yearned for a tail-coat, white waistcoat, white tie.

"God, I feel clean," he said, when he had finished dressing and looked at himself in the glass.

He would dine early, downstairs, he told Bronson. He might go on somewhere. Bronson needn't wait.

"Very good, Sir Atherton. I've put your drops on the table by the bed."

Buddy nodded in what he conjectured was the take-it-for-granted Athertonian manner, and went out. In the little vestibule hung the hat, fur coat and silk scarf of evening ceremony, and from the coat pocket peeped a pair of white gloves.

He dined in the great, shaded room, discreetly filled, at that early hour, only with theatre parties. The delicacies of scent and sound, the glimmer of women's dresses, of bare arms and shoulders, the daintiness of

tables, the deftly moving forms of liveried servingmen, that strange mingling of the dignity and the froth of life, so characteristic of London—all the sweet wonder of things for which his starved soul had ached, there filling it to plenitude, so that the mere material food that he ate was but a delicious item in the grand banquet of the senses.

To get back to this world, considered but twenty-four hours ago as lost for ever, it was intoxicating, worth the commission of any technical crime and its vastly unpleasant technical consequences.

Hot dogs and Hamburgers at a filthy counter in a filthy shack in St. Louis, Syracuse, any old purlieu on the outskirts of American civilization, had been his portion for the last few abhorrent years; together with foul linen, old and hateful clothes, coarse associates, men and women, honest in their way—often in their way heroic—but men and women, in all their ways far flung from the caste into which he was born.

A girl from a distant table caught his eye, and smiled recognition. He acknowledged her sign. She was one of Atherton's friends. One of his friends. Who she was he didn't know. It didn't matter. He had magically re-entered the charmed circle in which such women have their being.

He fingered the stiff white piqué bow of his tie. God, how wonderful.

Yet, supposing he had met the girl face to face and she had spoken to him? How would he have answered her? He realized that his joy was a fearful one and must be taken very seriously.

After dinner he went to a theatre—a gay revue, and again his heart was full of gladness.

During the interval, he was smoking a cigarette in the lounge, when he received a shock of an unanticipated kind. A man in an untidy dinner-suit looked

at him for a minute, and then his features broadened into a grin.

"Why, Buddy, who'd have thought of seeing you here?"

Buddy recognized him as one Thompson, a fellow "extra" in Hollywood days, and fortunately with no claim on his friendship. His heart seemed to stand still. It is a ghastly ordeal for a man to deny his identity. He met the salutation, however, with a blank yet polite stare.

"I beg your pardon."

"But you're Buddy Drake——"

Buddy smiled. "My name is Drake; but I'm Atherton Drake. You're mistaking me for my twin brother, Brotherton."

Thompson apologized. The resemblance was startling. But now he saw the difference.

"You'll pardon me, sir."

"Of course, of course! The most natural thing in the world."

Buddy laughed and, as the curtain bell was ringing, left him with a courteous wave of the hand, and went back to his stall.

After all, it was easier, he reflected, to deny knowledge of Brotherton's acquaintances than to assume knowledge of Atherton's.

That night he slept like a tired dog.

Bronson woke him the next morning, bringing with him a bundle of letters. Buddy sat up in bed and opened them nervously: a couple of bills, a couple of receipts; a letter from Atherton's stock-brokers suggesting a change of investments; a card of invitation to the Annual Dinner of the Royal Philological Society, with a request from the Hon. Secretary that he would respond to the toast of "The Guests"; a note from one Kate Rowlands asking him down for the week-end

after next to "Friary Court," and addressed from Cadogan Gardens; an estimate from his "respectfully, John Smithers," for projected repairs at Newstead Park; and finally a pencilled missive which made Buddy scratch a puzzled head.

This last ran:

DEAREST,—

I must see you. Let me know where and when. It's awfully urgent. M.

It was the fly-leaf of a sheet of notepaper without an address on it.

Buddy confided to himself the fact that he was damned. How could he communicate with "M," without knowing her name or address?

The envelope bore the Brighton postmark. The paper was thick and expensive, the handwriting cultivated. "M" was a lady of some quality, at any rate. But who was she?

He was half turning over in his mind the possibility of retiring with the least possible disgrace from an intolerable position, when his eye fell on *The Times*.

The undertaker, yesterday morning, had suggested relieving him from the labour of making the customary announcement. What he now read he himself had dictated. There it was:

DRAKE. On November 7th, suddenly, in London, Brotherton, younger son of the late Sir Michael Drake, Bt.

He was dead. *The Times* said so.

There was no question of retiring. He must see it through. Yet, he felt afraid.

CHAPTER IV

THE uncanny nervous strain had relaxed. Atherton Drake was laid to rest with his fathers, and Buddy, master of his possessions, reigned in his stead. It was a week since he had landed at Southampton with six pounds eight shillings and sevenpence and a gold watch and chain for all his fortune. Now he found himself a man of ample means, with the wide world spread before him, for his enjoyment. If only he could enjoy it. For he walked with Fear, and slept with Fear, which of nights awakened him to shivers of clammy sweat. So far all had gone well. How long would it last? He brought all the armoury of his mercurial nature and love of life to face the Fear.

The wind, however, continued to be tempered by a kindly Providence. Sudden bereavement and notorious ill-health accounted for immediate retirement from social life. Severe neuritis excused the use of a typewriter in polite correspondence, and accounted for any possible variation of signature. As in physical appearance, and in voice, so in handwriting the brothers were strangely alike. The main differences lay in the scrawling habit of the one and the neat precision of the other. Buddy found this out after many hours' sinful practice in the dead of night, when Bronson had gone to bed, and there was a bright fire in the library in which sheets of signatures could be destroyed. He passed a minute of sweating terror

when first he stood at the bank counter and passed across a cheque to self for fifty pounds, all filled up, save for the signature, in typescript.

"How will you have it, Sir Atherton?" asked the cashier.

His knees sagged beneath him, and he broke into an hysterical giggle. It was not even worth while telling the cashier about his neuritis.

Encouraged in this experiment in taking bulls by horns, he made a telephone appointment with Mr. Edgar Fry, of Messrs. Fry, Bilson and Fry, Atherton's solicitors.

Mr. Fry, senior partner, elderly, bald, clean-shaven, rubicund and genial, received him heartily.

"So glad to see you, Drake. Do take off your overcoat if you find it too warm here. I'm a chilly soul and it's a beast of a day outside. I saw the announcement of Brotherton's death. I thought of writing to you, but—well, you know——"

"Yes, yes," said Buddy.

"After all, perhaps—nobody's enemy but his own. *De mortuis* et cetera."

"Quite so," said Buddy. "He seemed to find amusement in chucking away his life."

The solicitor sighed in acquiescence. Then:

"What can I do for you, my dear fellow?"

Buddy came straight to his point.

"I find I can't live in this confounded climate any longer."

"I know I wouldn't if I could help it," said the solicitor. "Where are you thinking of going?"

Buddy was vague. He had thought of the South of France, South America, Sumatra—and other sunny places where Atherton's cronies and acquaintances would be unlikely to congregate.

"I'm thinking of giving up England, anyhow for

some years," he said. "But there's that country place of mine, Newstead Park—in my absence what's the good of it?"

"You might let it."

"Or sell it."

"Quite so," said Fry.

Buddy felt relieved. His confidential solicitor regarded the sale of Newstead Park as a normal proposition. It was on this business he had come.

"Do you think you could find a purchaser?"

"I could put it into the hands of agents who doubtless could do so."

"I wish you would," Buddy said fervently. "To tell you a secret, I hate the place."

Fry laughed discreetly. "I thought you would when you bought it. But you said something about dimly foreseen eventualities. . . ."

"They haven't eventualized," said Buddy at random.

Fry nodded and said he was glad to hear it. What the devil did he mean by that? thought Buddy. Had Atherton at any time been contemplating marriage?

"Well then, that's fi—that's settled." He corrected himself, for the academic Atherton wouldn't have said "fixed." He went on, "How much do you think the place will fetch?"

Fry regarded him humorously. "Considering your improvements and the altered value of money, I should say about £6000 less than you paid for it."

Buddy translated instinctively the transatlantic "Oh hell" into an Athertonian "Dear, dear. I hope you're wrong." It was grotesquely difficult to live up to Atherton. Was such a life worth living? His shoulders shrugged imperceptibly. "We'll see what offers we get. For the time being I'll leave everything in your hands."

A few minutes later he rose. "That's about all," he said.

"By the way," said Fry, with a detaining gesture, "what about the will?"

"Oh, yes, the will. Well?"

Buddy was there to receive, not to give, information. "The death of Miss—Miss Blenkinsop, wasn't it?"

Buddy nodded. "Yes, Cora Blenkinsop."

He listened to the ensuing explanation almost in a dream. The mysterious lady of Turtle Road was dead. Atherton had asked the firm to send him the will, usually in their custody, so that he could look it over in view of necessary changes.

He no longer owed the lady of Turtle Road £7000. The mere question of the money was neither here nor there. It was the method of paying the debt of honour that had worried him. Now the poor thing was dead. The Lord once more had tempered the wind to His shorn lamb's conscience.

If only he could subtly induce Fry to tell him who the late Cora Blenkinsop of Turtle Road, Ealing, had been in the flesh. She could have been no ancient retainer of the Drake family; he would have remembered her name. A naughty lady? Possibly. But what could such a dry stick as Atherton, companion of Archbishops and friend of erudite dons, as his correspondence proved, have to do with naughty ladies? On the solicitor's lips he observed the ghost of a dry, satirical smile. If only he could choke out of the man his knowledge of Atherton's private affairs. He assumed an air of melancholy.

"Poor thing," he sighed.

"Yes," said Fry in acquiescence, "poor thing."

Which didn't get him any further.

Again he rose. "I'll have to think over the will

again. I'm not at all satisfied with it as it stands. It'll need radical alterations."

He parted from Mr. Edgar Fry with what he conceived to be Athertonian cordiality, drove home in the car, and put the absurd will in the fire. The only debt that could possibly worry him now was the £2000 to Edgar Fry. The Platonic Academy was non-existent, and the Conservative Party, or, for the matter of that, any political party, deserved to be. His conscience was unruffled. As for Fry, one of these days he could get hold of a wad of untraceable foreign notes to the value of £2000, slip them into an envelope and post them anonymously to Fry. He might get some woman somewhere, with a feminine hand, to write on a scrap of paper: "From a grateful client." He chuckled at the thought of the hair-tearing puzzlement it would afford the elderly senior partner of Messrs. Fry, Bilson and Fry, of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

If there had not been a Puckish element in Buddy he would not have changed clothes with Atherton.

On his way home, his mind being still concerned with his moral responsibilities under the will, his eye caught the sign on a building which announced it the home of a great insurance company. He stopped the car and entered. No business under the sun could have been more simply transacted.

After lunch, he spoke to Bronson.

"I've come to the conclusion," he said, "that I can't live in England any longer. I'm selling Newstead."

"I can't say I'm sorry to hear it, Sir Atherton."

Buddy glowed. As both Fry and Bronson commended his intention, he gathered Newstead Park must be a beast of a place.

"I never really liked it."

"All right in fine weather in summer, but damp

and exposed and, if you'll excuse me, Sir Atherton, the more modern improvements you put in, the more it tumbles down."

"Just so," said Buddy. "How old are you, Bronson?"

Bronson looked surprised at the question. His age? Fifty-five.

"How long have you been with the Family?"

"Over thirty years, Sir Atherton."

"A long time."

"It is, indeed. I remember giving poor Mr. Brotherton his first fishing lesson. Sir Michael had given him a rod on his sixth birthday."

Buddy turned away with a smothered "Good God." He had forgotten all about it. Now he remembered. The cloud-flecked April sky. The bit of dark, narrow water, with banks clear of bushes. His excited and clumsy efforts to throw with his toy rod. The cast made by Bronson—the rod thrust into his hands—the sudden vibration that thrilled all down his spine into his toes, as he realized, from Bronson's cries, that he had got one. The winding up of the reel, the sight of the little trout's head as it appeared at the other end of the arch made by rod and line—the agonized rapture of landing the two-ounce fish. That supreme ecstasy of his young life—he had forgotten that it was to Bronson that he owed it. He had ever been an ungrateful dog. If only he could stretch out both hands to Bronson and cry, "Of course I remember. Wasn't it wonderful?" But he was the unsportsmanlike Atherton, and must maintain but a tepid interest in poor Brotherton's young adventure. So he spoke with a glowing heart hidden beneath a mask of cool urbanity.

"I know. I know, my old friend. Such loyal services as yours are hard to repay. In fact, there

can't be any question of repayment. There can only be a question of your share in the family fortunes."

"I don't quite understand you, Sir Atherton," said Bronson with a puzzled knitting of the brow.

Buddy waved a slightly despairing hand.

"The time has come, Bronson, when we must part. You know what my life is. I may live another few years, or I may go out at any moment like my poor brother. I have you to consider. I've been thinking of leaving you an annuity under my will——"

Bronson murmured his thanks.

"But I think it would be better if I settled it on you now. I'm giving up Newstead and this flat, and I'm going abroad—to travel all over the world and see what I can before I die. I shall take with me a strong male nurse—a retired R.A.M.C. man—who will also act as my valet and secretary." A darn useful sort of fellow, thought Buddy, to whom this imaginary paragon suddenly leapt into the light of a practical possibility. "And so you see, Bronson, there would be no place for Mrs. Bronson and yourself in my life."

"I needn't say, Sir Atherton, that what you tell me is a great shock to me."

"It's a wrench to me, Bronson, I admit," said Buddy, "but life is full of these damned jolts. You and I, hitherto, have been singularly free from them. But they are bound to come. Now, under my will, I was about to leave you £300 a year for the rest of your life."

Bronson gave a little gasp. "That's more than generous of you, sir. Of course I have a few savings and Mrs. Bronson and I——"

"Yes, yes, naturally. But that's not the point. The point is that I'm going out into space far away from you, so I'm practically dead as far as you are concerned. So I propose either to buy you your

annuity now from an insurance company or give you in cash what they call the present value of it."

He drew from his pocket the papers he had brought from the insurance company, and ran his finger down the tabulated figures.

"You see—age fifty-five. Annuity of £300 a year. Cost about £4000. Take the papers, my dear Bronson, and talk it over with your wife and any business friend, and let me know in a day or two. And I think you might bring me a brandy and soda."

Bronson departed, perfect in demeanour, but muddled in brain. He returned with a decanter labelled "Whisky" and a bottle of Salutaris water. When mildly rebuked for error, he apologized.

"I'm upset, Sir Atherton. That's what it is. I never expected anything of the kind. Thank you, Sir Atherton. Indeed, I never expected it."

Buddy, drinking the brandy and soda with which Bronson speedily returned, wiped a damp forehead. He thanked God that he had rid himself honourably of Bronson, a perpetual danger. And yet he had twinges of conscience. That first little trout! Men who are so inextricably interwoven with one's destiny should not be ruthlessly torn out of it and thrown to the winds. He sighed. It was a cynical world. After all, with £4000, a man could afford to choose the wind most favourable to his purposes. Buddy left it at that. Even had he been the super-sentimentalist, he could scarcely carry Bronson and his wife with him round the world and into all its odd corners where he hoped to lead a full and enjoyable life, untrammelled by the conventions that were part and parcel, inside and outside, of the late Sir Atherton Drake. There came a time when every man must look out for himself. That time had come both for Buddy and for Bronson.

That evening, when he came home from a theatre, he found, among his practically unanswerable correspondence, a letter in the same handwriting as the pencilled scrawl he had received from Brighton. It was from Paris. It bore the heading of the Hôtel Plaza-Athénée. It was as vague and disturbing as the other, which he had all but forgotten :

DEAREST,—

I can't understand why I've not heard from you. It can only be illness. Of course I realize the dreadful shock of your brother's death. I saw from the newspapers that you had attended his funeral."

" Damn the newspapers," said Buddy.

And I hope to goodness the effort wasn't too much for you. Still you might have asked Bronson to telephone.

Buddy proceeded to damn Bronson.

If you can't write, do tell him to let me know how you are. It's so unlike you, Atherton, to leave me in the air like this.

Buddy was about to take the damnation of Atherton in his stride, when he reflected that the poor chap was dead and possibly already judged.

I *had* to come to Paris, I simply couldn't face it. He got to know, I don't know how, that I was at Brighton, and said that he was coming to have it all out with me. So I took the next boat from Newhaven. A ghastly three-hours' crossing in a gale. And apart from all this I'm feeling rotten in myself.

If I don't get a word from you soon, dearest, I'll go mad.

Diana is with me. We went last night to "Athalie" at the Comédie française—just because you always said I ought to see it. I liked it in a way, but, darling, did it never strike you, as Diana puts it, how singularly unfunny it is?

Buddy, with perplexed brows, but suddenly smiling lips, murmured:

"I find the woman beginning to be sympathetic." Or was it the Diana whom she quoted?

All the same, dear, I love you. If you were fit I should ask you to come over at once and see me, as there are perfectly silly complications, about which I don't want to worry you by letter. But if you can't come just send a message to calm the dreadful anxiety of

Your own devoted

M.

Buddy read the letter several times. The writer was a woman of position. Otherwise she would not have been staying at the Hôtel Plaza-Athénée. She wrote a flowing, cultivated hand. Her loose style denoted breeding. Instinctively he realized that she could not be classed with the late Cora Blenkinsop, of Turtle Road, Ealing. Between Turtle Roads and Palace Hotels stretch impassable social abysses.

But who the devil was she? Obviously she knew her Atherton. Her knowledge was proved by her delicate gibe at his recommendation of the giddy merriment of Racine. It was a serious affair. She loved Atherton and took it for granted that he loved her. And who was *He*, the Terror, before whom she

fled, ill as she was, from Newhaven to Dieppe, in a gale? Father, brother, husband? It could only be a husband, thought Buddy.

What was Atherton doing, anyhow, with another man's wife? Atherton a gay dog? The incongruity of the terms made him laugh. He almost heard his father cry out, "That melancholy pup?"

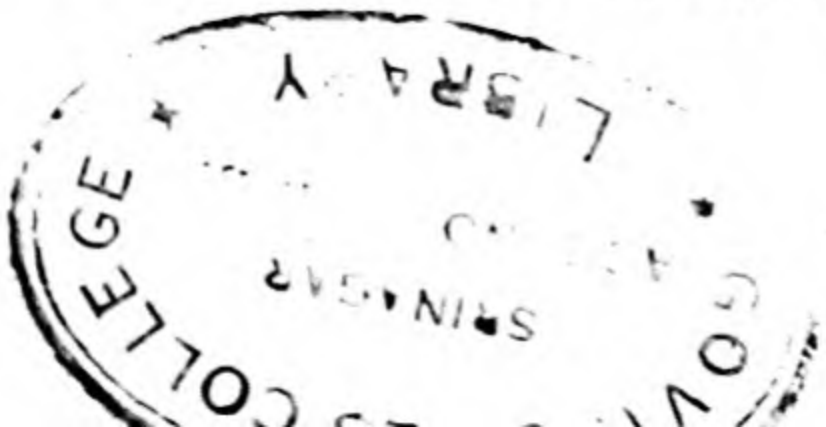
Yes. Whatever fictitious gaiety had enlivened the relations between Atherton and Cora of Turtle Road, it had little part in those between him and this baffling lady whose bold "M" was like the careless cipher of royalty.

Who was "M"? With all a kindly gentleman's desire in the world to save a lady from undue anxiety, how could he write, wire or telephone to her as "M," Hôtel Plaza-Athénée, Paris? Impossible.

Still more impossible to summon Bronson in aid. Bronson, from the letter's internal evidence, knew all about it. But how could he, even in his most debonair fashion—to say nothing of the fact that the debonair had been omitted from the category of Atherton's social graces—how could he ask Bronson to convey to a lady called "M" any message whatever by any means of communication? Men, in giving orders to their menservants, don't allude to ladies of their acquaintance by the initials of their Christian names.

What was it all about? Again Fear shook him. This time Fear in a different guise. In his folly he had not realized how in the lives of most men, even in the life of so remote and unhuman a man as Atherton, other people's lives are inexplicably involved. His folly, which at first he had regarded only as a technical crime, by which no one was injured, began to grow before him into a crime that might bring hurt and misery into the lives of unknown men and women.

After a stiff brandy and soda, Buddy reviewed his



position and found it untenable. After a second, he reasoned with himself. After a third, he decided to see Edgar Fry in the morning, give him full power of attorney, and book a passage to Japan by the first available boat.

CHAPTER V

HAUNTED by the apparently derelict and mysterious lady, Buddy slept little that night. The more he thought of running away to the other side of the earth and leaving her disconsolate, the more did it seem a scurvy project. If he carried it out he would never look himself gallantly in the face again. He must play the game; though what kind of a game it was to be he could but vaguely conjecture.

In spite of the awful danger of detection and its consequences, he must meet the lady and put himself definitely in the right or the wrong with her. Only then, as a decent human being, could he disappear. And the sooner he did this, the sooner would he be free to wander in far-off lands, lead his own life, and make for himself a set of companions and friends. This he longed to do, for he was beginning to feel intolerably lonely. Now, the only way of meeting the lady forthwith that he could devise was to go to Paris and sit about the lounge of the Hôtel Plaza-Athénée, until she should meet him.

"Atherton!" she would cry, coming forward.

"My dear!" he would say, springing to his feet.

Nothing more natural. Then he could trust to luck.

At five o'clock in the morning the scheme dawned on him as a dim idea. At six it was a firm resolve. At seven he rang for Bronson, who soon appeared with tea.

"I forgot to tell you yesterday that I must go to Paris for a few days. I'm taking the eleven o'clock train."

"If you can stand the journey, Sir Atherton, perhaps it would be just as well."

"What do you mean?" Buddy asked sharply.

With the tiniest kind of a deprecatory shrug and the faintest of smiles, Bronson answered:

"Well, under the circumstances——"

Buddy looked at him in a baffled way. He seemed to be leagued with the lady in a conspiracy of dark sayings. It was impossible to ask him to explain the circumstances.

"You'll see to everything for me," said Buddy, after a gulp of tea. "Packing; tickets; reservations."

"Of course, Sir Atherton. And I'll wire at once to the Hôtel Crillon as usual."

"I hate the Crillon," said Buddy, who had never set foot in that respectable hostelry. "Wire to the Plaza-Athénée."

"We've never stayed there before, Sir Atherton," said Bronson.

"All the more reason for me to go now. Fresh woods and pastures new."

"Very good, Sir Atherton. But I'm afraid I'll be lost in those same new woods, after all the years at the Crillon. Still, I'll do my best."

"You won't have the opportunity of being lost, Bronson, because you won't be there," said Buddy. "I'm going alone." Then, irritated by the astonishment in the man's face, he added petulantly, "I'm sick of being treated as a dangerous invalid. All of you—you, Dr. Selous, and everybody—are quite wrong. I'm as strong as a horse. I can get on quite well by myself. And I'm going to Paris on very special business."

"In a way, I quite understand, Sir Atherton," said Bronson with the resigned air of an undertaker requested not to attend the funeral.

It was only when the train started from Victoria that Buddy, comfortably seated in the Pullman, to which Bronson had mournfully attended him, felt at last a free man: free from piles of unanswered, bewildering correspondence; free from embarrassing encounters in public places; free from Dr. Selous, to divert whose mania for hourly auscultation of his heart seemed a life's work of ingenuity; free from Bronson, whose leech-like devotion was bound sooner or later to suck the blood of his secret; free, for a few hours, from the new Fear.

He was free. His opposite neighbour was a bluff and kindly American, a lawyer from Chicago. They split a bottle of champagne over their noontide chop. It was the first time since his landing in England that Buddy had held unfettered talk with a human being, and he glowed in the joy of it.

They travelled in the same carriage from Calais to Paris. The American, having fought in the War from the first, with the Canadians, had seen as much service as Buddy. They exchanged old memories. America, of which Buddy had a curiously familiar knowledge for an Englishman, provided a vast field of conversation. Buddy felt he had never talked so gaily in his life. He almost forgot the odd quest on which he was bound. He parted from his friend, whose name was Winslow Blaydes, with some reluctance, especially when he learned that he had engaged a room at the Crillon. They arranged to meet, however; so Buddy drove off from the Gare du Nord cheered by the thought that Paris could furnish at least one companionable soul.

On leaving the desk in the hotel lobby, he broke away from the young official who dangled the keys of the suite ordered by Bronson, and looked around the long lounge still filled with belated tea and cocktail parties; but, as his appearance attracted no especial feminine interest, he followed his guide to the lift, feeling half foolish and half disappointed. If only he had managed to surprise Bronson into a betrayal of the woman's surname! His position was about as lunatic as St. Thomas à Becket's Saracen mother in the streets of London. Even she had the name Gilbert to go by. But if he went about the public rooms of the Plaza-Athénée like a page-boy shouting "M.M.M." he would be looked upon as a disturber of the peace.

Some three-quarters of an hour later he entered the lounge again, this time trim, fresh-shaven, dinner-suited, and sat down at a table near the door to await the probable event of recognition, with a double dry Martini and an evening paper for company. The muffled sound of the dismal melody of "Sonny Boy" came from the *salle à manger* beyond. The room was sparsely filled, it being the hour when theatre-goers were finishing their dinner, and non-theatre-goers, the sedate and elderly who dine in the comparative quiet of their own hotel rather than in the more giddifying restaurants, were just beginning. But he could not read. He was shaken by the struggle between the Fear and his will. He was waiting before gates that must open to unknown, perhaps terrifying adventure. And, in any event, he must comport himself like Atherton—be dull, dry, dignified, unemotional. Also, whatever might be the adventure, there was a woman's heart at stake.

Then the more or less expected happened. A sudden swirl of motion, a curious noiseless vibration

of the air, through the near lounge door and a voice at his side:

"Well, here you are at last!"

According to his imaginary stage directions he leaped to his feet. He smiled.

"Yes, here I am. I had to come."

"About time too," said the lady.

She was a singularly attractive lady wearing a little casque-like hat and a costume of a deep shade of red. She was dark, of the clear olive complexion that shows the flush of the blood; pretty—more than pretty, with regular features and fine dark eyes that were rather angry; graceful, rather tall. He judged her age—rightly—at about twenty-five.

"Why on earth you didn't let us know you were coming I can't imagine. And when you did come you left no word at the desk. Here have I been ringing up your room, and of course no reply. So I had to come all the way down again and find you."

All that Buddy could gather from this incoherence was the impression that the lady didn't like him.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," he said, thinking of the excuses that Atherton might possibly have made in the circumstances. "But you know how worried I've been, and of course my health——"

"I never saw you look so fit in my life," said the lady. "Look here"—she suddenly swept the evening paper from the chair on which he had laid it—"we can't talk standing up like this. I'm dead beat." She sat down. "I want a drink."

Buddy caught a waiter's eye.

"Martini?"

"Yes."

He gave the order.

"You make me tired, Atherton. You've not even asked . . . well, anyhow, you had no means of

knowing . . . my wire reached the flat after you had left. Bronson opened it and wired in reply that you were on your way here. I only got his telegram when I got back, ten minutes ago, from the nursing-home."

"Nursing-home? Good God!" cried Buddy.

What else could kindly and puzzled man say?

"Yes. Operation this morning."

"How is——" He stopped short, not knowing whether he, she, or it had been operated upon. "Successful, I hope?"

"She's getting on as well as can be expected."

"She" must be the Diana of the letter, for it did not occur to him that his companion was other than the mysterious "M."

"Poor child," he said.

"I think you are the most cold-blooded fish I ever met," she exclaimed with a flash of her eyes. "I never stop wondering how Muriel can put up with you."

"Oh!" said Buddy. "Oh!"

His brain whirled for a moment and suddenly came to a stop. M for Muriel. Muriel was in the nursing-home. This, then, was Diana, eyeing him like a scornful Artemis. On the other hand it might be another intimate friend. Still, he must risk it.

"My dear Diana," he said, touching her hand on the table, "tell me all about it. I'm dreadfully anxious."

She seemed to relent, not drawing her hand away; also she answered to the name of Diana.

"You know how silly she is. She was in awful pain all last week and wouldn't let you know. Didn't want to worry you. There were enough complications already. She didn't tell me much. This morning I had to send for a doctor who diagnosed acute appendicitis and carted her off at once."

She went into such details as were right that the lover of an unhappy lady should know. In the midst of her narrative the waiter brought the cocktails. The end of her story and cocktail coincided.

"I'm about famished," she said.

Buddy waved a hand to the *salle à manger.*

"Let us dine."

"In there? Among all those English and American dowagers in bare flesh and pearls? Looking like a scarlet little *cocotte* in company with the notoriously respectable Sir Atherton Drake, Bart.? No fear. And I'm too hungry to change. Let's go to Fouquet's."

"Anywhere you like so long as it's amusing," laughed Buddy, forgetful of impersonation.

She arched her fine eyebrows.

"Since when have you developed the idea of eating amusingly?"

"It's a natural reaction, I suppose, my dear Diana," replied Buddy, in the Athertonian manner, "against all the very great worries that have lately beset me."

"Allons-y."

She rose from the table. He helped her into discarded furs. Then he had an inspiration.

"First let us telephone to the nursing-home. You can do it from my sitting-room, I've got to go up and get my hat and coat."

Diana agreed to the soundness of the idea, appearing to regard the suggestion as perfectly natural. They mounted in the lift. They entered the sitting-room, furnished in blue silk and imitation satin-wood.

"You'd better ring up, if you don't mind. You know all about it."

When he saw her sitting in telephonic communication with the nursing-home, he prided himself on the craft of a modern Ulysses. He learned from her guileless lips much that he yearned to know. She spoke in

French—French as clear and as crisp as you would hear it at the Odéon.

" The nursing-home ? I'm inquiring about Madame Flower. Yes. Flower. Operated for appendicitis. Ah ! It's you, Mademoiselle. I'm her sister, Mademoiselle Merrow, speaking. Madame Flower's sister. Yes, yes, of course. Only an hour ago I left. Yes. Yes. That's famous. Listen, Mademoiselle ; will you tell her, when she is able to receive news, that Sir Atherton Drake is with me in Paris . . ." etc., etc.

She turned. " She's getting on all right."

" Splendid ! " said Buddy.

But he couldn't let her know how really splendid it was. Now he had the names. Mrs. Flower—Miss Diana Merrow. Flower ? The sound echoed through his mind. Yes. Some days ago Bronson had said in a flat voice, " Mrs. Flower rang up." He had answered with hare-brained flippancy, coupling her with the Queen of Sheba or some such far-away personage. Now Mrs. Flower was M—M was Muriel. And Diana was Muriel's sister.

" Well, well, Diana," he said cheerily, " that's that. All's going well, thank God. *Allons dîner.*"

He threw on hat and coat and opened the door for her to pass out. She looked over her shoulder with a smile.

" Now and then you show recognizable flashes of the human."

They drove the short distance to Fouquet's in the Avenue des Champs-Élysées and found a table against the wall and sat down side by side on the *banquette*. It was long since Buddy had dined with a pretty woman amid cheerful surroundings. He resolved to make the most of his opportunity, bearing in mind, however, that he must not allow too many flashes of the human to develop into a blaze.

((Acc No 18))

They put earnest heads together over the *carte du jour*. He noted that Diana was a young woman both of character and experience. She waved away the customary futile and thought-saving suggestions of the *maître d'hôtel—filets de sole, poulet en casserole*—and compelled him to the attitude of *maîtres d'hôtel* before the foreigner of gastronomic rank. Oysters—which would he recommend on that particular evening, Marennes or Belons? The Marennes.

"I'm glad," said Diana, in English, "the bottle-green will tone in so beautifully with my shade of red."

Petite marmite. Was it really good and strong? If not, she would send it away. Then. *Pâté de foie gras* of Strasbourg. Fresh? *En croûte*? It arrived that morning. "*Bon!*" said Diana. And, after that, *canard sauvage au sang*—done in their presence. *Salade de saison* not over-poisoned with vinegar.

"It may play the devil with your digeston, Atherton, but I'm thinking of your soul's good."

"And wine?" Buddy asked, holding the heavy wine list.

"That's your affair. Better stick to Burgundy. What do you say to a Meursault and a Richebourg?"

Buddy smiled amusedly. She left him the responsibility of choice, but chose all the same.

"That's over," she said, when the final orders had been given. "I'm sorry. It's a very pleasant part of dinner. I don't suppose you understand it, you're so prosaic. If you'd only live in your imagination a little more, Muriel would have a better time."

He repressed an impulse of impatience. He didn't want to talk of the unknown Muriel. But he must. He frowned and stared at his fingers that were playing with his bread.

"How do you think I fail in my—er—duty towards Muriel?"

"Don't you suppose Muriel really prefers a go-as-you-please friendly sort of place like this to the damned decorum of Ritzes and Carltons and Plazas?"

"She would only have to tell me what she wanted," said Buddy.

"But she won't. It's what you want all the time. If you had any imagination you'd see it for yourself."

"Knowing my unfortunate tastes," said Buddy, "why did you bring me here to-night?"

She laughed and squeezed lemon over the oysters which the waiter had just set down before her.

"Because you're not my little tin god, Atherton. I don't care a hang about your respectabilities and your prejudices. I know what I want and I'm in the habit of seeing that I get it."

"And when you marry?"

"It takes a very strong man to destroy a deep-seated habit in a woman."

"These are lovely oysters," said Buddy.

"Lovely. But isn't it rather unlike you to suggest—even in this delicate way—that we might talk of pleasanter things?"

He tried to assume a courtly, old-world manner.

"It has always been my hope that you and I should never discuss any but pleasant things."

She laughed with undisguised mockery.

"You must have suffered a lot, my poor man, from frustrated—what shall we call it?—aspirations."

Buddy shifted a bit sideways and leaned on the table, so that he could see her face in full, and, in so doing, met her clear dark eyes. They seemed to hold rebuke, challenge, laughing pity touched by scorn. Her lips were set in a humorous smile. He wished suddenly that she would take off her hat and disclose

her hair. The hat was baffling. The hair would complete the riddle of her. He felt sure that her way of wearing it would be full of character.

The waiter brought the silver soup tureen. The *maître d'hôtel* served the soup and, after they had helped themselves to the grated cheese, waited for Madame's first experimental taste. He bowed at her smile of approval and went away a happy man. Buddy commented on the phenomenon.

"If people please me," said Diana, "they get what I've got to give."

"And if they don't please you?"

She shrugged her slim, rounded shoulders.

"You of all men ought to know."

Which retort was disconcerting. He went on with his soup in uncomfortable silence. Evidently the relations between this very much alive young woman and himself were, at the best, those of an armed neutrality. She suffered him—at times with a spurious gladness—for her sister's sake. Deep down within her she regarded him as the least considerable of God's creatures; that is, supposing for the sake of argument she believed in a God.

He finished his soup: excellent soup to which things feathered and horned had sacrificed their life essences. He had enjoyed it, in spite of his preoccupation. Then he turned on her.

"Why are you always down on me? All kinds of circumstances have been against me all my life—repressions, necessary ambitions, life impulses that have been strangled, God knows how. Do you suppose I didn't want to play cricket, row, dance, play the damfool when I was young? Do you suppose I really thanked God I was safe in a Government Office when other fellows were being killed in the War? Do you think I've enjoyed being a physical slacker all

my life ? " He seized the bottle of old white Burgundy from the ice-pail, filled his glass and drank it off regardless of common courtesy—to Diana's great surprise. " Do you suppose I enjoy being a rotten dry stick of an invalid ? Being repressed and repressed and repressed for six and thirty years ? If I hadn't some red blood in my body how could what has happened between Muriel and me ever have happened ? Damn it all, my dear child, I'm a male, not epicene."

He brought his hand down with a bang on the table. Diana regarded him with humorous amazement.

" Why on earth haven't you shown this cave-man side of you before ? "

" Do you like it ? " asked Buddy.

" I don't quite know," said Diana coldly.

He felt a tiny thrill of exultation. He had set her on a new track, at all events ; tempted her to a reconsideration of judgment. Even had he not his own vigorous manhood instinctively to proclaim before this full-blooded, all too desirable woman, there must be insistent loyalty to the shadow he impersonated. Could Atherton, obviously the lover of this girl's sister, have supported during the last half-hour her implied scorn of his romantic potentialities with the meekness of the watery-veined, self-satisfied philosopher who knows anything save that which is happening under his nose ? Impossible ! Atherton would have quarrelled with her in his own rasping way.

They went on with dinner for some time in silence, broken only by casual references to the excellence of food or the peculiarities of fellow-guests in the restaurant. He had evidently given her something to think about. Presently he said :

" All this time you haven't told me about yourself. What have you been doing since we last met ? "

"The same old thing. Running the shop more or less—chiefly less. Those altar candlesticks you couldn't make up your mind about, by the way, are sold."

"I really had no place in the flat to put them," said Buddy.

"I thought they were for Newstead."

A great idea flashed through Buddy's brain.

"I'm sick of the place," he said.

"Since when?"

"I never really liked it. It's dismal and damp. I shan't live there any more."

"I'm glad of that. I always thought it was a hole; but you seemed to like it."

"Repressions again," said Buddy. "I've been thinking about myself a lot lately—don't say that's nothing so unusual—I've been thinking in quite a different way. I've been living under a mask too long. I want to throw it off and be real."

"I certainly am having an interesting dinner," said Diana.

"You may laugh," said he with a shrug, "but it's true. What else have you been doing besides keeping shop?"

"Chiefly minding Muriel."

She said it with an air of resentment against him, as though the necessity for the minding of Muriel were his fault. The more he heard of Muriel the less attractive did she seem. Every one must come to her aid. Atherton must leave his affairs in London and run to Brighton or Paris or anywhere, at her call. He couldn't imagine Diana, mocking and efficient, requiring some one to mind her, even though she were suffering from the most appendicitical kind of appendicitis.

In his new character of Atherton in revolt, he raised

his glass of old Richebourg—he had just come to the end of his pink Strasbourg *pâté*—and said:

"Although you don't like me, Diana, you're far and away the finest woman I know." He bowed with an air—on his air alone Buddy had obtained many engagements in America. "My devoted homage."

She laughed outright at him.

"My dear boy, if you are going to make love to me, I shan't wait for the duck."

He laughed too.

"We'll have the sacrifice first, anyway—*canard sauvage au sang*. Savage duck in its blood. Then we'll consult the omens and see what happens."

He filled their glasses. They drank. It was a very beautiful wine—Richebourg 1911—the imprisoned dreams of grapes on the golden slopes beneath the sun's wooing of that glorious summer.

She turned, elbow on table, facing him.

"Dining with you alone is a new experience to me. Do you always behave like this with young women you take out to dine alone?"

Buddy deliberately sipped his Burgundy.

"Haven't I told you I've been trying to put off the old Adam, who has always struck me as being a bit of an ass?"

The *maître d'hôtel* presented the roast duck so smug and trim externally, but stirred beneath the brown skin by the wild fierce juices of the unregenerate marsh. The table, altar of sacrifice, was wheeled in front of them. The moment was too solemn for frivolous talk. The delicately carved slices were laid in the dish. The carcass was hastily put in the silver press. The bird yielded its last drop through the spout. There was deft stirring by the *maître d'hôtel* while white-aproned acolytes stood by in anxious readiness. A flame, a perfume, a smile—and the delectable dish was served.

They grew more companionable. Diana ceased to twit him, and talked lightly of things with which he was supposed to be familiar. He remained as silent as tact and discretion allowed and learned many useful facts, the most important of which was that he had been involved for the last two years in a very serious intrigue with the wife of one Horatio Flower, an evil, hard-drinking, stag-hunting squire who in his intervals of leisure collected postage stamps and bred chimpanzees. He also threw plates and boots at Muriel's head until, fearing for her life, she had left him, and lived, *sur la branche*, as happily as she could. Buddy gathered that she had a comfortable fortune of her own, that her husband's place was just within the borders of the New Forest, that his grounds marched with those of Newstead Park, and that the visiting terms on which their acquaintance had been founded had gradually developed into terms more intimate. It was he who had advised the cutting of Muriel adrift from the impossible Horatio, and had since constituted himself her silent, discreet and most constant lover. And, at the present moment, Horatio was worrying her to death, writing her letters in which he now implored her to return to him, and now threatened her with idiot invocations of the law if she didn't.

"She believes he's having her watched," said Diana.

"What for?" asked Buddy.

"Grounds for divorce, you ostrich," said Diana. "We've talked about it often enough."

"Oh, yes. Of course," said Buddy.

"It would be the best way out," she said. "Everybody knows what an impossible ass he is. No sensible creature would think the worse of the two of you. When you're married, Society, which both of you seem to regard as a mid-Victorian bishop's wife, would

open its arms to you and give you a hell of a good time."

She drained, with a little sizzling sound through the straw, the last drop of her *crème de menthe frappée.*

"Let's go. I've enjoyed myself tremendously. I never thought you could be such a perfect dear. Forgive me."

He laughed—thought out a pedantic twist of phrase:

"That I've won your approval at last, my dear Diana, is a very great comfort."

He slipped over her shoulders the furs that she had kept behind her on the *banquette.* The waiter came forward with the bill folded on a plate. The *chasseur* appeared with his hat and coat. He followed her out of the crowded restaurant conscious of eyes glancing at her admiringly on her passage, and manlike he sunned himself in the pride of her reflected glory.

A taxi took them to the hotel. While waiting for the lift, he said prudently:

"We'd better ring up the nursing-home together and save worrying them with two calls."

She accompanied him to his sitting-room. The call was put through. The answer came vaguely reassuring.

"I don't like it," she said, when the telephone interview was over. "She really hasn't got much stamina."

"If only she were like you," said Buddy, conscious of the superb strength of her youth, "I should be happier."

She laughed disdainfully, as she moved to the door. "I haven't wasted my substance in emotional living."

"You will, one of these days," he said, opening the door for her.

He accompanied her to the lift. They parted with valedictory waves of the hand. Darkness encom-

passed him as the smiling, mocking face beneath the red hat disappeared in the ascending lift.

He regained his sitting-room like a man in a dream and stood there helpless and stared about him.

If ever man felt himself floundering in mess, quagmire, bog, morass, quicksand, that man was Buddy Drake.

If there was one woman in the world to whose rescue, by all the laws of honour and decency, he was bound to struggle, it was Muriel Flower. If there was one woman in the world towards whom his heart leaped in appeal, it was Diana Merrow, her sister.

He floundered, with Fear grinning over his shoulder, all night long.

CHAPTER VI

BUDDY went out into a cheerless world ; a world of rawness and rain and leafless trees ; of streaming umbrellas, streaming vehicle tops, forlorn sodden posters on kiosks and pillars ; of the miserable morning gloom which lights in shop windows only make more miserable. It was not the Paris of his young memories or of his dreams in ramshackle Middle-West towns, wherein he had spent so much time during the past few dismal years. The only comfort to be gathered from the depressing streets was enclosed in the comfortable car which he had hired by the day. He was dry, he was warm, he sat soft. He could drive on for ever without thinking of wet boots, damp shoulders and rheumaticky hands. If money could give him, besides this cat's comfort which he fully appreciated, a cat's cynically contented mind, he would be the happiest of God's creatures. But money seemed to have brought him a host of worries, which seriously disturbed the soul's peace to which, after a stormy life, he considered himself to be entitled.

He drove to the nursing-home in Auteuil, delivered a vast basket of Riviera roses with a card on which he had inscribed, " Dear love and best wishes," and made his inquiries. From the nurse's guarded answers he gathered that, though things were going on as well as could be expected, it was wise not to set expectations too high. Mrs. Flower had curiously little power of resistance. Her condition would probably

improve towards the afternoon. Perhaps Sir Atherton would ring up later.

Buddy, his duty done, entered the comfortable car, to which he was conducted across the wet pavements by the chauffeur, protecting umbrella in hand. His next destination? He didn't know. The hotel? The Tomb of Napoleon? It would have been a jolly day for the Morgue; but he remembered that it had been removed from its old, comfortable quarters behind Notre-Dame. Besides, he must put in at least a couple of hours before lunch. In desperation he told the driver to take him to the Louvre.

In the dreary December light the sculptured ladies and gentlemen on the ground floor seemed cold and uninspiring. Even the little Laughing Faun, remembered from youthful days and at once sought out, only seemed to be doing his best in adverse circumstances; an unconvincing Mark Tapley of a little faun. The warmth and glow of the picture galleries cheered him for a time. He stood before the Carlo Crivellis and their gold and their luscious fruits, and thought of Californian sunshine. He warmed himself before the del Sartos. The "Vierge aux Rochers" recalled to him the eyes of Diana Merrow. He was glad, however, that Diana's chin was not so pointed. He had never liked women with pointed chins. There was something malevolently witchlike about them. What the devil was the name of that woman in Denver? By the luck of the Lord he had escaped being made the world's colossal ass. Diana had a lovely rounded chin. He sauntered into the Medici Gallery. What kind of man could Rubens have been to conceive the ideal woman as fat, creamy flesh streaked with pink? He passed by, somewhat revolted. Thank Heaven he was a modern and saw woman not in terms of flesh absolute, but in terms of—he flicked impatient

fingers, seeking his formula—spiritual intellectual beauty? Well, not too damned beautiful. There must be a compensating ugliness in life, something of the grotesque, almost incongruous in a soul, like garlic in a stew, to make it human; and this must be mirrored in a face so as to save it from inane perfection. The saving flaw. That was it. There was an impertinent tilt in Diana's nose . . .

After this discovery he grew bored with pictures, gallery after gallery sparsely peopled, on that dismal morning, with the least inspiring of man- and womankind. It gave him a shock to see sporadic clots of Germans who moved about freely, red Baedekers in hand, sucking in and storing facts in their drab, earnest Teutonic way, just as though there had never been a War. He had accepted the existence of Germans in the United States. In the melting-pot of America there is no nationality too fantastic for acceptance. But in France. . . . There was a clot before the examples of Fragonard and Watteau, typically Prussian. An aggressive man in a rusty morning coat and a bowler hat, a cameo pin stuck in the knot of his tie which fell half an inch below his bone collar stud, obviously a professor of sorts, expounded the historical and structural significance of the butterfly paintings.

Buddy regarded the group for a few moments and then turned away, in a state of wonder at the mentality of a people which can enter a country where it is abhorred, in pursuit of a culture which it is impossible for it to understand.

He drove back to the hotel and held a telephone conversation with Diana, who had just returned from the nursing-home. From the fresh, pleasant tone in her voice he concluded he was in her good graces; a conclusion further confirmed by her suggestion they

should lunch in his sitting-room. In half an hour, said Diana.

By the time that she appeared, Buddy, delighted, had arranged the setting of things. In the small affairs of life he was a practical man and could act quickly. Her first startled glance of amusement, as it swept the room, rewarded him for painstaking.

A cheerful wood fire blazed beneath the chimney-piece. On a small table stood bottles, glasses, cocktail shaker and a bowl of ice. By the side of one of the places on the table set for lunch, lay a great bunch—a bouquet—of violets, a position significantly in contrast with that of a vase of tawny chrysanthemums in the middle.

She laughed as she shook hands.

"My dear, is this home or heaven? I've never been so cold in my life. Ugh!" She crossed to the fire. "Oh, this is good. And that?" She pointed to the cocktail tray. "I'll have to keep a diary. Atherton, day by day."

He did his best to assume the Athertonian manner.

"I'm always distrustful of chance concoctions in an hotel. The ingredients are there. If you have any favourite recipe of your own——?"

"You want me to make the cocktails?"

"If you'll honour me."

"You're the biggest fraud I know," she laughed, as she went over to the little table. "Stuffed olives and little sticks. You won't persuade me that a French *maître d'hôtel* thought of that just by himself."

"I won't try," said Buddy. "After all, I pride myself on observing the outer decencies of life."

She busied herself for a moment or two in pouring liquids out of bottles. Then she said:

"You did that this morning, at any rate. Muriel loved the flowers. She charged me with the usual messages."

He made some sort of response, more occupied by the fascination of the girl's splendid assurance and the grace of her movements, as she rattled the silver shaker, than by the vague image of the pallid invalid. He stood by, watching her; handed her a napkin to mitigate the frostiness of the metal surface. He decided, even more than on the previous evening, that she was good to look upon. She had come down from her room without a hat. Her hair, black and wavy on her forehead, was short cropped and parted in the middle. In certain aspects she looked half boy, half Madonna; but, when she turned her deep mocking eyes on him, he knew that she was all woman; all that can be attractive, teasing, melting, stony and damnable in woman. With all this, however, he saw in her no concern. Here she was pouring out cocktails, in the most comrade-like way in the world. He knew instinctively that his presumed relations with Muriel were the sole sanctions in the girl's mind for this off-hand, almost family intimacy. What her moral attitude towards the liaison might be he had no idea. Most probably, he thought, she dismissed the ethical side of things with a modern shrug. Obviously she adored her sister, with a queer, protective kind of love. Last night she had been ever ready to bristle at him like a suspicious porcupine. On the other hand, no momentary protective instinct being aroused, she was, in the frankness of her heart, more than willing to accept him, in sisterly fashion, as a sort of illegitimate brother-in-law. He would have to walk very warily.

She sat, glass in hand, on a chair by the fire, one leg thrown over the arm.

"God! What a beast of a day! Poor Muriel in that fetid room!"

"Fetid?" Buddy queried.

She threw back her hanging leg to her knee.

"Oh, don't be so pedantic. You know exactly what I mean—filthy, loathsome, hideous, ghastly, chilly, bare, sanitary, eugenic, antiseptic, without the least little friendly, homely germ for her to pal up with. I'd like to see you there on the flat of your back on a bed three feet wide and five feet from the ground, and the whole inside of you hurting like hell."

Buddy took up a position with back to fire.

"I know it's dreadful for our poor darling; but is there anything that can be done to make the dreadful place more comfortable for her?"

"Of course not, modern scientific treatment being what it is. Wives of emperors and multi-millionaires have to go through the same hygienic horrors as Muriel. But that doesn't alter my pity for Muriel lying there in that fetid, filthy, loathsome room. You have your own sense of the meaning of words. I have mine. Yours is literal and prosaic. Mine is imaginative and figurative. Mine's better than yours!" The waiter entered the room. "Thank God, there's lunch and we can end this idiot discussion."

They took their places at the table. She lifted the clump of violets. "For me?"

He bowed. "Of course."

She smiled her thanks and buried her face for a second in the flowers.

"What a lot of experience you must have had," she said.

"In what?"

"In the nice conduct of women."

"Instinct, my dear," said he, "sheer instinct."

It still rained drearily and the black gloom deepened over Paris. They ate by electric light, and after lunch sat by the cheerful blaze of the fire. For him restrained talk was difficult. He longed to tell her of the things with which his life had been concerned: athletics, the War, America—things of which Atherton had known nothing. On the other hand, he knew little or nothing of the scholarly and political pursuits that had been the main features of Atherton's career. He couldn't even talk intelligently on bodily ailments. Once more he must lead Diana to talk of herself, her history, her aims and ambitions, her pursuits. He felt happy when she took as her text her old furniture shop in Sloane Street. It was succeeding beyond her wildest hopes. She specialized in Renaissance Italian, small pieces to attract fastidious dwellers in small and expensive flats. It was a company, "Merro Ltd," of which she was chief shareholder and managing director. All her small fortune was involved. She considered that the suppression of the final "W" in her name was a stroke of genius. "Merro Ltd" gave the impression of Jewish solidity and cunning *flair* of the authentic. She told of the byways of Italian travel on which she picked up her little masterpieces. He learned, from her careless allusion, that she had embarked on this career of commercial virtuosity when one Guy Rickham had turned her down. Buddy grasped the fact that he was supposed to know all about Guy Rickham and his turpitude.

He nodded sagely.

"You were well rid of the fellow," he said.

"I was. I was young then and didn't know much. It hurt awfully for a time. When I found out later what a beast he was, I knew I'd had a narrow escape and praised God from whom all blessings flow."

"He was one of the rottenest brutes I've ever heard of," said Buddy.

A grateful glance showed her appreciation of the sincerity of his tone. And Buddy was sincere for the moment. A man who, with the gift of Diana in his hands, cast her off—base Indian that threw away a pearl—must be sunk to the neck in a *cloaca* of vileness. All the same, kindly soul though he was, he rejoiced in the thought of a fellow-creature irremediably fallen from grace. If Guy Rickham had been a tolerable human being, Diana would have married him, and would not be sitting there to-day with him before the fire, in this peculiar and delicious intimacy.

What had happened? He could not conjecture and dare not inquire. Had the said Guy Rickham, corrupt Acteon, intruded too violently on her Artemisian sanctities? His name suggested that of some man about town, from whom even modern mothers sought to shelter their daughters, and modern fathers, who are still old-fashioned, their sons.

"And what about the others?" he asked.

She sat stiff in her chair. "You know very well there have been no others."

He smiled. "How can a man know very well anything concerning women? Or vice versa?"

"Yes," she said, lighting a cigarette, "I suppose we shall be opposite numbers till the end of time, doing the same thing, each in our particular way, and never meeting."

After a while she rose. It was half-past three. She must go to the nursing-home. No, no; not the slightest use his accompanying her. He couldn't see Muriel. She would ring him up as soon as she got there and give him the afternoon's bulletin. Yes. She would use his car. He was a dear. A lovely

lunch and again thanks for the violets. She was dining and theatre-going with the Snow-Derwents and so wouldn't see him till the morrow. She repeated on parting from him, violets in hand:

"I'll tell Muriel again I never realized what a dear you are. It'll cheer her up."

Buddy returned from the lift-gate to his now stark and desolate sitting-room. Why had Fate declined to allow Diana, with her glow of face, voice, body and spirit, to remain there for ever? Fate loomed before him as the object of his peculiar dislike. He felt more lonely than ever.

A telephone call found his only acquaintance in Paris, Winslow Blaydes, his travelling companion of the day before. Was Mr. Blaydes free to dine with him that evening? Mr. Blaydes wasn't free, but he had a cheery bunch of American friends dining with him at Ciro's, and if Sir Atherton would honour him by going there—why, every one would be delighted.

Buddy accepted with joy, craving for companionship. He slept and read contentedly during the intervening hours. At the restaurant he met the bunch—folks of breeding and charm, and full of the joy of holiday life. In their genial company he forgot Atherton's austerity and reticence. They received him, who knew America in its length and breadth and infinite problems, as a man and a brother.

He went to bed at half-past three, conscious of many indiscretions, but very happy. For a few hours he had resumed his own personality—that of Buddy Drake, Soldier of Fortune, mummer, Bohemian, man of the world, Englishman of birth and breeding with manifold traditions behind him—the real Buddy Drake—incontestably, if the worst came to the worst, Sir Brotherton Drake, Baronet, of old and respectable creation.

He had spent a delightful evening. Perhaps he had been indiscreet in crediting Atherton with his own experiences. The social world was small, and acquaintances of the Americans might well be acquaintances of Atherton, who, knowing that Atherton had never set foot in America, might cast suspicion on him as an impostor. He shrugged his shoulders. One or two risks run more or less couldn't make much difference. He was pleasantly sleepy. He got into bed and turned out the light. There were many good things in life ; one of the best a warm and comfortable bed.

On waking rather late in the morning the first thing he did was to ring up the nursing-home. He learned that Mrs. Flower had not passed a satisfactory night. She was still restless with a disconcerting temperature, and could receive no visitors that day except Miss Merrow. Of course his message would be conveyed to Mrs. Flower. Buddy put down the telephone with mixed feelings. He was genuinely sorry that the poor unknown lady should be suffering, and at the same time felt ashamedly relieved at the prospect of at least a day's respite. For the day must come for him to meet Muriel in the flesh and reduce to some kind of sense a fantastic situation.

He dressed, rang for breakfast and, after the meal, turned to the pile of correspondence that had been forwarded from London. This opening of letters was always a depressing affair. So many he could not answer, even on a typewriter with neuritis as an excuse. There had been one, a day or two ago, a model of damned cramped penmanship, eight pages of it, from a person at Oxford about another person called Apollonius of Tyana who aired futile views on the universe nearly two thousand years ago. It would have been meat and jam to Atherton. To

Buddy it was just hay and thistles. He had caught a phrase or two: "You must see my point . . ." and so on.

He typed out:

MY DEAR FRIEND,—

You are perfectly right.

Yours always

A. D.

This reply might have made Atherton turn in his grave, but it must have pleased the man at Oxford. But all letters were not so easily disposed of. He had brought a small suit-case full of them to Paris.

He sat resigned, pipe in mouth, before the sitting-room fire, the waste-paper-basket by his side for envelopes and circulars, and began his uninspiring task. The first three or four letters were of the usual type. Then he opened an envelope addressed in capital letters, a thin and miserable envelope, bearing an E.C.3 postmark. It contained a cheap piece of paper on which was written, also in capital letters, the following message:

You damned scoundrel. If you don't pay up before the first of January I'll make it hot for you.

X.

Buddy laughed as he threw aside the letter.

"The first flippant communication I've had," he said.

Fear, however, jogged him, almost jocularly, in the ribs. What did he know of Atherton? Of Atherton's responsibilities? Of his deviations into crooked paths? Blackmail obviously—to which Atherton would pay no attention. He flung the sordid sheet into the fire.

A few minutes later he took up a long blue envelope —thick, expensive paper—with the flap running its length.

His pipe dropped from his mouth as he read the curt contents.

A famous firm of solicitors had to inform him that Mr. Horatio Flower, of Langways Manor, Hampshire, was bringing an action for divorce against his wife, Mrs. Muriel Caroline Flower, and was citing him, Sir Atherton Drake, Bart, as co-respondent. They begged him to refer them to a firm of solicitors who would be authorized to accept service on his behalf.

Buddy picked up his pipe, knocked the ashes out against the hearth and polished the bowl against his sleeve.

What, in the name of God and Humanity, was he to do?

He rang up Diana, on the point of going out. Would she see him for a moment on very serious business?

She came down, bright and glowing, in the red costume in which he had first seen her.

"What's all the seriousness about?"

He handed her the letter. She read it and handed it back coolly.

"Well, you expected it, didn't you?"

Buddy had to say:

"Of course."

"It's a good thing it has come at last. It'll ease everybody's mind and put things straight. In a few months you two can be married and can go everywhere."

"Yes, I suppose everywhere," said Buddy stupidly.

"Everywhere except the Royal Enclosure at Ascot."

"Where I've always been known as that prominent sporting baronet."

Diana laughed. "Cheer up. It won't be as socially

awful as you think. There will be no defence, so neither of you'll have to turn up. It'll make Muriel very happy. And it'll be a relief to my maiden modesty to get out of this corrupting atmosphere of sin. So bless you, my children."

She moved to the door and turned to him, a quick anxiety replacing the ironic laughter in her eyes. " I'm off to see her. She's none too well, poor darling."

" So they told me," said Buddy.

" I think we ought to have another opinion."

" I think so too," said Buddy.

" Well, come with me and see about it. You're responsible for her now, at any rate. Is your car downstairs ? "

" Yes."

" Then let's get in it at once," said Diana.

CHAPTER VII

BUDDY spent a day of melancholy scarcely mitigated by a dinner and theatre with Diana. She was kind and sisterly, sometimes even motherly in her efforts to make him see the sunny side of divorce. Naturally a man of his academic and political distinction, of his reputation for fastidiousness and austerity, must shrink from the inevitable grin on the face of Society when the fact of his co-respondentship was published in the newspapers. Bishops, at first, would look at him askance, and men of the elderly buck type, which he particularly disliked, would dig him in the ribs with a revengeful chuckle and call him the modern equivalent of the sly dog of their youth. Diana sympathized with him in such afflictions. But she also brought consolation. A few months hence, when they were respectably married, who would worry about their dissolute past? In these days most people had enough worry of their own, wiring their own glass houses, without wasting time in futile stone throwing. Ostracism? Rot! Quite the contrary. They would be welcomed as an unexpectedly romantic pair. Romance dead? Never on your life, she declared. The more Society, proclaiming blatant materialism, tried to affirm its demise, the more did Society recognize it and sanction it even in its unsavoury classical guises. Well, that was cynical perhaps. Anyway, a pair of faithful lovers never lacked

popular sympathy and welcome. That might be platitudinous, but it was true. That was the suspicious thing about Truth to the highbrow mind. The more you tried to express it in brilliant paradoxes, the less like Truth did it become. The expression of Truth was so damned simple and ordinary.

This consoling presentation of affairs by a warm Diana might possibly have been grateful and comforting to Atherton, the lover of Muriel; but to Buddy, who had not as yet seen the lady, it was entirely lacking in appeal. All the time his mind was preoccupied by the problem. How, as a man who has ever shrunk from hurting his fellow-creatures, was he going to get out of the abominable situation?

He sat for a long time in front of the fire, before going to bed, cursing himself, as he had so often cursed himself during the past years. He was always cutting himself adrift, burning his boats, doing impulsive, idiotic, irremediable things.

This impersonation of Atherton was, after all, so unnecessary. Atherton dead, the title was his. As next of kin, he would have had access to Atherton's private papers. He would have found the will. He would have thrown it into the fire, and, Atherton having died intestate, he would have inherited.

But would he have thrown it into the fire? That would have been a cold-blooded, criminal act. And he wasn't a criminal, had never been a criminal, and never would be a criminal. No. In those hypothetical circumstances he would have never destroyed the will. Besides, he wouldn't have been such a brainless fool. The solicitors who had drawn it up would have behaved so odiously that the inevitable result of his applying for letters of administration would have been many years of penal servitude.

After all—he consoled himself by the thought—the

impulsive fool that he had been was a more intelligent being than the cold and stupid criminal. In assuming Atherton's personality he was only defrauding a non-existent Academy and a political organization that had no God-inspired reason for existence. Once more he argued his conscience clear.

But there was this poor, hapless lady. Surely the way of the innocent transgressor was unnecessarily hard.

A day or two afterwards she took a sudden turn for the better, and, on his perfunctory arrival at the nursing home, he was greeted by the matron who, smiling happily, told him he could present his flowers to the patient in person.

Dogged by cold Fear he followed the cold, clean nurse up the cold, clean stairs and was shown into a cold, clean room. On a cold, clean bed lay a thin-faced, pallid woman, with bleached fair hair showing dark at the roots and tired though lustrous dark eyes. And by the bedside sat Diana, swarthily glowing and glorious.

He came forward. The woman in the bed smiled and stretched out a delicate hand. He took it, like a man in a dream, and bent his head and kissed it. She said, her eyes on his offering :

" More flowers ? My dear, you're spoiling me terribly. Look round. I'm living in a garden. I don't think they've got another vase in the place."

He looked round and saw that the cold, clean room was ablaze with colour. Diana rose and took the flowers from his hand.

" They'll have to send out and buy some. I'll see about it." She turned at the door. " I'll come back in three minutes. Then your time will be up."

She went swiftly out. Buddy had already noted

one of her characteristics—a swift noiselessness of movement, a spirit of speed without flutter of garment or sound of footstep. It had been his first sensation of her in the hotel lounge the moment before he had seen her. Now she was gone before he could hold open the door.

His heart sank; the colour had faded from the flowers. Life seemed to have faded from the room.

"This is very idiotic of me," said the sick woman who was Muriel, "but it isn't my fault."

"Fault? My poor child," said Buddy, loathing himself for the inevitable imposture, "it's any lurid adjective you like to call it. Anyhow, Guibault seems to have got to the bottom of the trouble. He explained it to me yesterday. You're on the mend, on the up grade. In a week or so you will be dancing."

"Dancing?" There was a query in her eyes. "What an odd thing for you to say, dear."

He sat down on the chair vacated by Diana.

"Why?"

"Well, you've always hated my dancing, because you could never dance with me."

Buddy reflected. Yes. Atherton and his heart; prim, austere even in his emotional outlook.

"I've been thinking a lot the last few days," he said. "I've had a lot to think about, as you know. And I've come to the conclusion that I've been rather selfish, putting my rotten health and my position and what-not too much, as it were, in the foreground."

She smiled wanly. "Diana has been telling me something about it."

She paused for a long time, looking him deep in the eyes.

"You'll stick to me, Atherton, won't you?"

He said earnestly:

"You may be sure I'll do my very best for you, Muriel."

He was sincere. He would do his best. But what that best might be he could not, for the moment, imagine.

She sighed contentedly. "Of course. I knew it. But it's nice to hear you say so. I've been having such a bad time. You know. A threatening of pneumonia. I'm better, they say."

He tried to be cheerful. "You'll be up and about very soon, now. Have you made any plans—where to go after you leave here?"

"No," she replied helplessly. "Have you?"

Buddy felt equally helpless. What kind of plans could he make that could embrace the two of them?

"You at any rate, my dear," he said, "must clear out of this; go south—get warm in the sunshine. The north is no place for sick folks. I shall be much better away from England myself. Diana has told you about Newstead? Well, that's the first step."

"The next is to travel round a bit, until we find the right spot?"

He answered her smile. "Yes, that's about it."

But in his heart there was blank dismay. She took it for granted that they should seek the spot together; set out, as soon as things practical allowed them. At all events, it was urgent for him to attune his mind to an indeterminate gap between now and the start of their joint travels. The main and immediate consideration, he said, was complete restoration to health. Cannes, Mentone, Bordighera—as soon as she could be moved. He himself must stay behind for a while to settle up affairs. She acquiesced unmurmuringly. Yes. Dolly Valentine was in Mentone; would put her up at the villa at any time.

"Splendid!" said Buddy. "For the present, let it go at that."

Diana came in, and again the room glowed. She set two vases triumphantly on a table.

"Of course the silly liars had them. They were reserving them for a little lady who is daily smothered in orchids by a Peruvian prince. I gave them hell." She leaned over the bed. "Feeling better, now you've seen him?"

Muriel smiled up into the girl's face, and there was a happiness in her eyes that made Buddy wince. Diana nodded across the bed to him.

"That's enough for to-day. Nurse's orders. She's waiting outside."

Buddy went through a leave-taking tenderly formal or formally tender; possibly—as he thought afterwards—such as she expected from Atherton. He took her hand, bent down, kissed her cheek and promised a longer visit on the morrow.

He drove back from Auteuil sick at heart, dreadfully troubled in mind. What the devil was he to do? From his quandary there was no issue that did not lead to destruction.

He spent the rest of the day in examination of such issues.

The obvious one was cynical acceptance of the situation. He had already, long ago, stolen a woman from his brother. This was but an ironical self-repetition of history. His soul revolted. The cases were on different planes of emotional, spiritual and physical befact. To run away with a brother's virginal betrothed—no matter how great the wrong done—was a human, clean, passionate act justified by great mutual love. To supplant by fraud the same brother, now dead, in the arms of a trusting woman, a mistress who, sacrificing all, counted on becoming wife, was both an abomination of the flesh and the spirit.

He would not even have the miserable sanction of a great physical temptation. Poignantly though he pitied her, she was the last woman in the world by whom he could be attracted. He judged her to be negative, helpless, dependent, the ineffectual though charming woman who follows the line of least resistance. He didn't like her bleached hair. It was symbolic. Simulation of a lover's ardour would be a nightmare of cold horror.

Another issue. Could he go through with it, the months of waiting, the marriage, in the guise of an Atherton so decrepit in health, his life hanging on so tenuous a thread, that all he could give her would be his mere name and the protection of his roof? He thumped his sound body and regarded his hard-bitten face, from which traces of recent privation had already faded. A loving woman's anxiety would have him examined by all the heart and other specialists in Europe, who could not do otherwise than pronounce him as fit and tough as when he marched into his first trench in Flanders, years ago.

No. That issue would land him in the bog of absurdity.

He could run away now, pack up his things, take train to some port and sail away to South America, South Africa, Madagascar, his whereabouts known to none but his bankers.

It was the way out of a mean thief, a sneaking crook. God! He could never speak to himself, look himself in the face again. The divorce, an undefended case, would go through, decree *nisi* made absolute after six months, and the poor, defenceless lady would be left there, stranded, *plantée là*, heart-broken, life-broken. And Diana would be on her side, breathing against him a venom of righteous invective that would reach him through illimitable space in no

matter what obscure cranny of the world he might choose to hide his despicable self.

Confession ? Surrender ? Perhaps the bravest sally of all from the beleaguered quandary.

" I've got to do it ! " he cried exultantly aloud.

Then, common sense blotting out Fear stared him in the face.

" How the hell can I ? "

Confession to the world at large would be a great gesture of which he did not feel himself capable. It would mean penal servitude. Until he began to consider this issue he had not realized what an arch-criminal he would be in the eyes of the law. He was guilty of dreadful crimes : wrongful impersonation ; false registry of death ; destruction of a will ; fraudulent usurpation of an estate. He didn't know the legal names of all these offences, but of their heinousness he was startlingly aware. No ; confession would do nobody any good.

He might go to her privately and throw himself on her mercy. If she kept his secret, the divorce would go through. They would part friends, and she would be free to marry any other man she chose. But what if she either deliberately or through flabbiness of temperament betrayed his secret ? It would be too romantic a piece of gossip for any outsider to keep to himself. The news of his usurpation would be all over London in a few days. It would be hinted at in the newspapers. The police would take a hand, and his uncomfortable destination would be Dartmoor.

Of course he could buy a revolver and blow out his silly brains. That would be a complete solution. It seemed to be the only one. But, no matter how shrewishly it had treated him, Buddy had always been in love with life. He could not bring himself to

kill the thing he loved. It was out of the question. But what on earth was he to do?

The only honourable course was throwing himself on her mercy. But when?

Diana burst in upon him as he sat in this welter of indecision.

"I've just rung up," she said, "and she has started another temperature. It's too bad. The matron puts it down to the excitement over your visit."

"I'm sorry," he said, "I tried to be as restful as I could."

"Perhaps that's it," said Diana, accepting a light for a cigarette. "When I left she was worrying whether you really loved her."

"I think I've given her proofs," said Buddy.

She made a little gesture with the hand holding the cigarette and looked into the fire.

"I suppose you have. And I suppose she has given you proofs too. But you've always been the tamest lovers I've come across. You know—or ought to know perfectly well—your joint romance, to give it a name, has always beaten me. When she married Horatio I was glad. He seemed to be the very man for her. He——"

Buddy interrupted:

"Even when he ill-treated her?"

"She must have asked for it. Anyhow, that's not my business. He was mad over her. Then you came along. At first I thought it was a passion in a teacup."

Buddy rose and stood over her frowningly.

"And what did you think it was afterwards?"

She answered him with a hard look in her eyes:

"I shouldn't like to say."

"Well, don't. I'm fond of you, Diana, far fonder than you are of me. But if you say insulting things about me, I'll throw you out."

She pitched her cigarette into the fire, and rose and gaped at him.

"Throw me out?"

"Yes."

For all his impersonation of Atherton, he was damned if he was going to be treated like a worm by any woman alive. He forgot their fictitious relations. Suddenly he remembered. Laughter shook him. He planted both hands on her shoulders.

"Sit down, my dear. You don't know everything. What you want out of life and what Muriel wants out of life are two entirely different things."

She sat obediently, but met his eyes in dark challenge.

"Why drag me into it?"

"You've dragged yourself into it. Every woman's temperament, or whatever you like to call it, is her own standard."

"It doesn't take much temperament to put a foot in a bath and find out if it's hot or tepid."

"I don't see how you could possibly have put your foot in our bath," he countered jestingly. "Besides, argument by false analogy doesn't lead us anywhere."

"There are times when I hate you," said Diana.

"Especially during the last few days."

She flashed a glance at him. "What made you say that?"

"You'd better think it out for yourself, my dear. Anyhow," he continued after a pause, "it's much better for a man's self-respect for him to feel himself actively hated than treated with a sort of passive contempt."

She glanced at the clock, and rose again.

"I must go and dress. I'm dining out. I don't know what's come over you of late. You're quite different. I've tried so hard to be your friend."

"I hope," said Buddy, with a little flourish, taking

her hand in both of his, "that you'll find it easier every day."

As soon as she had gone, he realized that his delectable passage at arms had not been over-prudent. Atherton, having to set the girl in her place, would have adopted an entirely different method of combat. Impervious to her attack, he would have been dryly, donnishly, witheringly sarcastic. He doubted whether she would have attacked the real Atherton at all. He, Buddy, she said, was so different.

Buddy dined and went to a revue by himself and, although feeling lonely, passed a tolerable evening.

The next day was marked by various happenings. First came a letter from Edgar Fry, urging him to return to London in order to discuss both the divorce proceedings and a tentative offer for the purchase of Newstead Park.

Then he learned on presenting grapes at the nursing-home that Mrs. Flower was not well enough to receive him. He must wait for two or three days, when they hoped she would be really strong again. Oh, there was no danger now—the matron smiled—but any little excitement would retard her recovery.

He went away almost light-hearted. He had been spared this dreaded ordeal of a second interview with the unfortunate lady. If he obeyed Fry's summons, a further meeting, by some tactful means or the other, might be indefinitely postponed. This would give him time to think—to seek or devise some honourable issue out of his quandary. For there must be one, as yet unrecognized, but still staring him in the face. He would gain a spell of comparative ease, at any rate. A care-free week was a gift of the gods in a harried life. It wasn't as if Muriel were in serious danger. Recovery was certain. His absence from her was

better than his company. He could go with a conscience clean, unsullied by unkindly act. Things were beginning to straighten themselves out already. Buddy was an inveterate optimist.

It was a bright, clear morning. The sun shone mildly now and then—out of patches of pale-blue sky. Paris smiled on him and he smiled on Paris. He felt healthily hungry. Where was that place he used to go to years ago—the old-fashioned restaurant with the world-famous cellar of wine? Voisin! He gave the order to the chauffeur.

There it was still, in its little street in the heart of Paris. How well he remembered it! He dismissed the car. He would walk home. The miserable weather of the past few days had deprived him of necessary exercise. Not only was exercise good for his own liver, but it was essential to the avoidance of un-Athertonian flesh.

He lunched well. The place was just as shabby and cosy as ever. The *sommelier* seemed to have mellowed in his own cellar. Buddy was happy. He had a definite thing to do. Over a cigar and old brandy he planned the doing of it. He must leave that day for London—by any old night boat—via Havre, for instance. He might wire to Bronson. He had a guileful inspiration. He would add to the telegram, "On no account must anyone know that I'm back in town." That for one thing would queer an ever-solicitous Selous. Buddy dreaded Selous and his stethoscope and tapping fingers and affectionately searching questions. While in London he had developed escape from Selous into a fine art. Besides, all kinds of unknown acquaintances believed him to be in Paris. Let them still be happy in their illusion.

It was necessary to see his solicitors about the

divorce. He had a vague idea of legal procedure, but assumed that some sort of legal paper would be stuck into his hand. Muriel, he supposed, had her own solicitors. He must speak to Diana about it before his departure.

Then there was Newstead Park and a prospective purchaser. For the first time he realized that a man couldn't sell a country-house full of intimate belongings —books, pictures, documents—with the same carelessness one would sell a motor-car. Furniture, books, pictures—they mattered very little ; but the thought of documents hit him like a sudden blow on the head. Of course he must go there and examine locked drawers and cupboards. In the latter there might be God knows what skeletons. In the former, any kind of compromising papers. The Atherton of public and the Atherton of private life were two very different people. Buddy recalled the dirty, anonymous letter that he had thrown into the fire. There had been Cora Blenkinsop. In a far higher category, to be sure, there was Muriel. Prudence, common sense compelled him to Newstead. Otherwise he might just as well add to the House and Estate Agents' advertisement of " Fine old country-house standing in its own grounds, etc., etc.," the inducement, " Unopened Bluebeard's Chamber thrown in."

Beyond doubt his own self-interest made a visit to Newstead imperative. He had a busy time before him. But Buddy always felt happy when inexorable Destiny set his feet on a particular road. After all, it was Destiny's responsibility—Fate's funeral—not his.

Now and again, indeed, in the far distance, he had heard the awful susurration of the wings of driving Furies. But it had died away. Perhaps he had unconsciously turned towards them with his wistful smile

and they had veered off from the pursuit of a not very interesting non-evil doer.

Buddy paid his bill and walked out into the pale sunshine and keen December wind. It was good to be alone ; to have money in his pocket again ; good, with that same money, to be once more in Paris treading with springing step the pavements that symbolized the Paris of his youth. He wandered haphazard, and, after a while, found himself walking eastward along the Grands Boulevards. In the Champs-Élysées he was lost. It was a new and confusing Paris. But now here was the Boulevard Montmartre—changed of course—in a way more drab, in another, more startling with new buildings—but, anyhow, the Boulevard with the tang of old associations still lingering around its kiosks and gaily coloured columns and its trees and its daintily stepping, hurrying girls, and serious men with great rolls of paper or leather pouches under their arms. And there was the same old smell—a smell defying description, the smell of Paris. Perhaps, he mused as he walked, that is the secret of the fascination of Paris. It has an odour of its own, no matter if you stand in the Place de la Bastille or under the Arc de Triomphe. No other capital has its own particular perfume. Not London, nor New York. Chicago, perhaps, when the wind blows from the packing sheds. Buddy shuddered at the whiff of memory. But he soon spat it from his mind. He was in Paris, enjoying the very essence and spirit of what, in some obfuscated yet imaginative way, he conceived to be Paris.

And then suddenly another thing happened.

An outcast man was selling little monkeys on the pavement ; clockwork monkeys that, wound up, scratched themselves, brought up the harvest in both slender hands, blinked their eyes and nibbled in realistic appearance.

Buddy paused for a moment, amused. The man pushed a new monkey from his box.

"Cinq francs, Monsieur."

The vendor was an undersized little man with a bush of white hair under an old hard felt hat.

"Cinq francs, Monsieur."

Their eyes met.

"Dio! Buddy—Buddy Drake!"

"Tonio! Good God!" cried Buddy.

CHAPTER VIII

"YOU was such a swell guy that I didn't think it could be you," said the man.

"Things are good for me," said Buddy. "But they seem to be pretty awful for you. What in hell are you doing here?"

"Selling the monkeys!"

"But, good God! Why?"

The little, white-headed man held out a couple of raw, misshapen hands.

"The rheumatic fever. How can I conjure with the cards? And they never gets no better."

"You're not going to sell any more monkeys if I can help it," said Buddy.

To dismiss the chance American acquaintance he had run across in the lounge of a London theatre had been a simple matter of prudence; to deny himself to Antonio Gaffarelli was unthinkable. In the time of his worst adversity, some four years before Tonio had been more than a brother to him. He had nursed him through pneumonia, had lent him money, had cut out a week's engagement in order to watch over him. Tonio had attached him to himself as bosom friend, almost hero. There had been times even more recent when Buddy had been glad to drop into Tonio's comfortable little New York flat in Greenwich Village, for the sake of an hour's warmth and quiet and even of a meal. Tonio in those days was a clever conjurer and earned good money for

his turn in vaudeville and for general engagements. Buddy had not heard of him for a couple of years. Now this heart-rending encounter.

Clear as was the sky and dry the pavements, a bitter wind swept the Boulevard. Buddy, warmly clad, shivered, loitering. The little man, who had nothing but a thin jacket over a dirty white sweater to protect him, was blue with cold. The ends of his trousers were caked with recent mud and his shoes were piteous in their dilapidation.

"We must go indoors somewhere and talk," said Buddy, looking about him.

Tonio shook a red forefinger. "No, no, Buddy! We attract too much attention."

Which was true. Tonio, his bush of white hair crowned by his forlorn old hat, a size or two too small for him, was in himself a noticeable figure. The pair together, the elegantly dressed, unmistakable Englishman and the odd Italian outcast in obviously familiar conversation, were a target for the curious glances of all passers-by. Some began to linger by the box of monkeys. Buddy hailed a taxi.

"Jump in and we can talk in my hotel!"

But Tonio would have none of it. "No, no! You give me your address. I write to you."

Buddy thrust his hand into his trouser pocket where lay the change of a thousand-franc note which he had tendered in payment of his luncheon bill, and stuffed the lot into Tonio's hand.

"If appearances are what you're thinking about, go off at once and get some sort of outwardly presentable kit; and take a taxi and come to the Plaza-Athénée. You'll come?"

The corners of the little man's lips drooped and the light in his eyes grew dim.

"Come! Does one spit on the Hand of God?"

Buddy took out his note-case. "Here's my card. Yes, that's my real name, old man. I've inherited money. You show that card at the desk and I'll do the rest. How long will you be?"

Tonio make a quick gesture with his crippled hands.

"One hour?"

"Good! Now, off—*avanti!*"

"But my monkeys?"

"I'll take your damned monkeys," said Buddy, bending down to the box on the pavement.

Tonio bent down also in protest. He at least would put them into the waiting taxi. Eight or a dozen people gathered round. A *sergent de ville* came up.

"Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?"

"As you see," said Buddy, in tolerable French. "I am buying the monkeys of my friend."

"And you, has he paid you?"

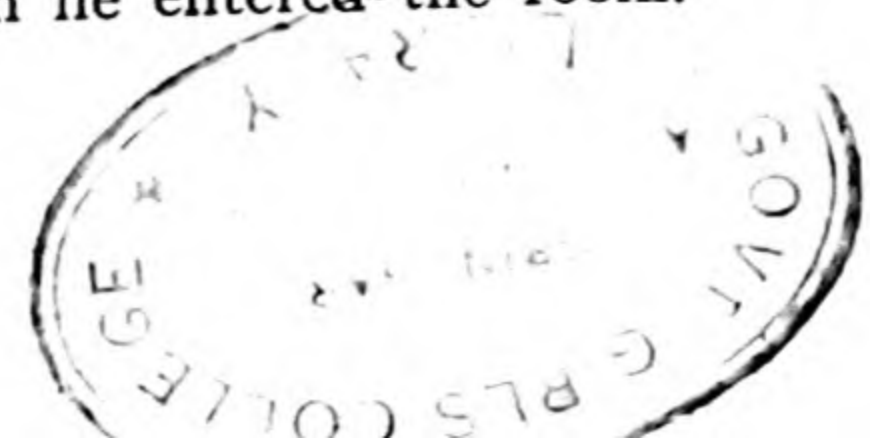
"Why, yes, Monsieur."

"Eh bien. Qu'est-ce que vous faites là? Foutez-moi le camp, et plus vite que ça."

Buddy jumped into the taxi with the monkeys while Tonio fled before Authority.

In Tonio's cardboard box were ten little mechanical monkeys. Buddy cleared the mantelpiece of ornaments which he deposited on the bath-room floor, and replaced them by the string of monkeys. They proclaimed far more significance of life than the meaningless imitation Sèvres rubbish. They all had little, beady, human eyes which regarded him with ironical benignity. They seemed, according to his fancy, to confess that they were a damned sight better off on a warm mantelpiece than on the wintry pavement of the Boulevard.

Anyway, they would strike a chord of welcome to Tonio when he entered the room.



He made up a great fire and waited for Tonio. He decided, after much cogitation, that this was the least comprehensible of all incomprehensible worlds. Here was one of the most guileless sons of God, endowed by God with a gift of deft fingers whereby he was privileged to give pleasure to thousands of his fellow-creatures. . . . His thoughts wandered into long parentheses. Pleasure? Surely it was far more than that. Tonio's conjuring played a tremendous fundamental part in the scheme of human things. For a quarter of an hour a day a thousand men and women lost, in a queer delight, all consciousness of their troubles, their anxieties, their sorrows. Multiply those thousand quarters of an hour by many thousands and yet by a thousand again, and how many millions of hours' surcease from care had this little man with his dexterous fingers given to the human race! Well—he continued his original thought—here was Tonio endowed by God, so favoured by God-arranged circumstance as to be able to lead a life of enjoyment, in all humility and religious gratitude for God's gracious rewards for well-doing, suddenly smitten by the only calamity, save death, that could render nugatory his one gentle contribution to the happiness of mankind.

There was no sense in it unless the *Bon Dieu* had pre-destined him to play the Jongleur de Notre Dame for all Eternity before the Angels in Heaven.

Buddy found relief from these soul-disturbing speculations in winding up the ten monkeys, one after the other, and setting them all alive and happy and grotesquely realistic.

After an hour or two Tonio appeared, summarily apparelled in outer decency. He had provided himself with a soft felt hat, a good overcoat, a silk muffler, a pair of trousers and boots. He was also freshly shaven. He beamed on his benefactor.

"At last after many months," said he, "I am 'Monsieur' again. When I have time I will buy myself a shirt. But like this," he withdrew his wrists into his coat-cuffs, "no one would know. You see, dear friend, I was hungry—I had to eat. I was dirty—I had to wash and shave. All that took up most of the hour I gave myself."

"You've really had a—a good lunch?" said Buddy, his hand hovering over the bell-push.

"*Si, si!* I never did know I could eat so much spaghetti!" The little man smiled and pressed his stomach eloquently. "And sausage too, and bread. You see when a man has joy and hope for *condimenta*—what you say?—to season his food, he eats, he eats." His lips twisted up wryly for the smile, and tears were not far from his eyes.

"At any rate," said Buddy, ringing the bell, "we can have a drink."

Tonio waved a hand to the mantelpiece.

"My monkeys!"

"No," said Buddy. "My monkeys. My Tonio. A family party. The only family I've got. Now sit down, old son, and tell me all about it."

There was much complexity of detail, but little in broad outline, in his simple story.

It all began in Omaha. He had finished his turn, emerged into the street. He must go to the hotel, near the railway station, collect his baggage, and catch his train to the next town. It was a night of bitter rain. The roadway glistened and flashed with yellow taxis, but not one of them was empty. He waited and waited. Time passed. He must walk to the hotel. He arrived there drenched to the skin. When he arrived in Chicago he had to take to his bed. They removed him to a hospital. Rheumatic fever! God knows how long he stayed there. When they dis-

missed him as cured, his hands were like the knotted twigs of a tree in winter. He went out into a wintry world. And there was cold death in his heart.

"Ah! My Buddy, you don't know what that is."

"I've had a slight touch of it now and then in my life," replied Buddy.

"Yes, I remember. You gotta bad time, but you had not your means of living gone. A painter who is blind—what good is he? A conjurer who cannot conjure—what use is he? And all my money gone."

The little man made a wide, forlorn gesture.

"I always thought you were a rich man—putting money away every week in banks and things."

"I did put it away," said Tonio mournfully, "but not in banks. All I had in the world was locked in a safe in my flat—Twenty-Second Street."

"But," said Buddy, with knotted brow, "there was Julietta to look after it."

"She did look after it," said Tonio. "And when I came out of the hospital, I find I have to look after Julietta. I look after her for four months and I never find her."

"Good God!" exclaimed Buddy in amazed indignation. He reached the anti-climax of the commonplace, and bent over Tonio, gripping his shoulders. "Julietta let you down like that?"

"Just like that," said Tonio, meeting his angry glance with mournful dog's eyes.

"Who was the man?"

Tonio lifted his shoulders. He had never heard of any man. Julietta was not any man's woman. If there had been any known man, Dio! he would have Buddy to understand that, in spite of ineffectual fingers, there would have been a murder so bloody and ghastly that every tall building in New York would have shivered and shaken in horror. But no! Nothing

of the kind. Julietta had written the most loving of letters during his illness. She had arranged to meet him at the New York Central Station. He arrived there. No Julietta. He drove to the flat in Greenwich Village, opened the door with his key, and found emptiness, emptiness—bare walls, bare floors, bare rooms. His only possession that remained was a glass bowl which he had used in his gold-fish trick. The bowl was cracked and even the gold-fish had gone.

The safe had been broken open and all his elastic-banded packets of thousand-dollar biils and his Bearer Bonds had gone with the furniture and the gold-fish.

Julietta. Buddy had known her intimately—as intimately as a Buddy Drake, with his English traditions behind him, could know the pretty, immigrant Italian drab and shrew who was his friend's mistress. Why not wife? he had asked many times in past years. The answer was: Why? There had been a husband in the far dim distance. Why worry about dismal divorce and marriage when things as they were made life so blissfully simple? It was none of Buddy's business. They were, as far as he could see, a devoted and perfectly respectable couple. To the world at large she was Mrs. Gaffarelli. Yet Buddy had never liked her—a pinched and wizened Neapolitan shrew. In fact, he detested her. But if Tonio was happy, who was he to express unpleasant opinions?

And now the all-but-foreseen had happened. She had cleared out of America, bag and baggage, chock-full of money. She was now, probably, in Naples, engaged in profitable and most unmeritorious commerce.

"And that woman, Buddy, whom I adored—the

star of my life, the sun and the moon of my soul—Ah!"

Tonio strode about the room, clutching at his hair.

"And then, old chap?" Buddy asked, after a decent interval for anathema.

Well, there came very quickly the fall of Tonio, Master of the Mystery of his Craft, though powerless to practise it. He managed to obtain the position of assistant to one of his pupils, a brilliant prestidigitator, professionally known as Frosco. He toured with him for awhile; then accompanied him to Paris. All went well until one day when Frosco, crossing the Place de l'Opéra was unable to prestidigitate himself out of the way of a taxicab and an omnibus each going in a different direction. Frosco was killed. Tonio's occupation was gone. He knew no conjurers in Paris who needed an assistant with maimed hands. Nobody in the great city had any use for him. He slunk about in the poverty-stricken, non-criminal underworld. Then he learned the trade secrets of the vendors of toys on the Boulevard. He invested his poor savings—some three months ago—in the line of scratching monkeys. He was earning, when Buddy met him, about ten francs a day.

Ten francs; twenty pence; one-and-eightpence; eleven shillings and eightpence a week.

"My God!" cried Buddy. "In another month you'd have starved to death."

Four years ago Tonio Gaffarelli had not a care in the world—not even Julietta, who in some queer way was his joy and inspiration. He dressed in fine linen and the modern equivalent of purple. He lived in the comfort of warm rooms, good food served at a pleasantly set table, soft beds, bath-room, schemes of decorative furnishings, which, abominations of ghastly

horror though they might be to Buddy's English eyes, represented, to the Italian peasant, the consummation of his æsthetic dreams. His apartment was his ingenuous pride. He drove about New York—more often it was Julietta who drove about—in a six-cylinder, fifty-horse-power, orange-coloured chariot. He was the happiest man in the world.

And now ?

He sat opposite Buddy, by the fireside. A little man, with a firm, keen, mobile face illuminated by mild, dark-brown eyes—dog's eyes—the faithful eyes of a cocker spaniel. Above it all, the absurd, premature, Paderewski bush of white hair. Buddy had failed to induce him to take off the white silk muffler and blue overcoat.

His crippled hands, painfully holding glass and cigarette, made Buddy wince with pain and pity. What could he do for Tonio ? What kind of occupation could he find for him ? In what kind of business could he set him up ? He had spent his life conjuring. He could do nothing else besides conjuring. He wasn't even an illusionist with mechanical secrets of magic. His only gift had been the lightning fingers of the prestidigitator ; he could do wonders with cards, coins, eggs, flags, ribbons, rabbits, pigeons, gold-fish. The only trick of his own invention had been the seizing of a dagger from the empty air, thrusting it down his throat, and, after a second's agony of suffocation, coughing up a revolver. This trick, which had done so much to make his modest fortune, had been a matter of pure sleight of hand.

Buddy, after a spell of reflection, said in answer to the self-imposed problem :

" Look here, old chap—I give it up. It's up to you to tell me what you would like me to do. I'm rich. I've inherited. I have a title—I'm what you Italians

calls *nobile*—I told you. Yes, I, Buddy Drake. Funny, isn't it, old man? But that's so."

"I did always feel—somewhere in myself"—said Tonio, "that you were not just a bum actor. You were something quite different. That's why I——"

"That's why you loved me," laughed Buddy. "But I want you to love me more. At any rate, I owe you a debt of gratitude that money can't pay. And yet money help seems the only way possible."

"A rich man can so easily throw money to a beggar," said Tonio, his eyes on Buddy, "and of course the beggar is glad to have the money. But he is not grateful to the rich man. He does not love the rich man. He hates him. And for why? It costs the rich man nothing. But if the rich man gives him something of his heart"—he tapped his own—"it is all so different."

"My dear Tonio," said Buddy, "that's the whole point of it. Once I was naked and you took me in, and so on. A vague quotation from the Bible. You can draw on my heart and my banking account for what you want."

Tonio looked down on his maimed hands, and wiggled his fingers.

"I can do ordinary things, but not more than ordinary things."

He paused. There was a span of silence during which Tonio was lost in thought. By way of relieving a nervous strain Buddy wound up the monkeys on the mantelpiece. One after the other they went through their weird, life-like performances. The horrible blinking of eyelids was, in itself, a fascination to the onlooker. Already, however, two of them didn't blink. The inner threads of the mechanism had failed. But what could one expect for five francs? One

monkey stopped pessimistically in the act of conveying to its mouth the harvest of its skin.

Buddy, no deep philosopher, became impressed with the truth of the futility of human and simian endeavour.

Again he put his hand on Tonio's shoulder.

"Well, what about it, old son?"

"If I could stay with you always," said Tonio, "I should be quite happy"—and meeting a look of humorous puzzlement on Buddy's face, he continued hastily: "Oh, I don't mean doing nothing. I wanta work. You have a valet—no?"

"Valet?" cried Buddy. "But you're a brother artist!"

Tonio waved a hand before his face. "My father and mother, when they come in New York, they have a peanut stand. Then they had a little joint on the East side—hot dogs and hamburgers and tamales. I washed up plates. Then I went to wash up plates at a swell restaurant. When I grew up I was waiter for many years. Then I found I had the gift and practised, practised—until I found I need be a waiter no longer. That is the history of my life, why should I be too proud to be a valet?"

"Doesn't seem right at the moment," said Buddy. "Can you work a typewriter?"

Tonio's face lit up. Of course. In his business he always typed his letters. He used to put initials on them to impress his correspondents with the belief that he employed a stenographer. To send a business letter, in America, in hand-writing would be to confess that you had so little business that you could afford the time to write. Oh, yes. He could still type. He used to type for Frosco when his hands were much stiffer. The exercise would do his fingers good.

"Then you can be my private secretary," said Buddy.

Tonio regarded him somewhat askance, striving to attune his mind to the idea of Buddy Drake needing a private secretary. He had his pride. All his life he had worked for his living. Though ready to accept a gift from a friend to relieve his immediate necessities, he shrank from the conception of himself as a parasite dependent on a rich man's bounty. His office must be no sinecure.

"What shall I have to do?"

Buddy dragged a small suit-case from under the blue satin-covered couch, opened it, lifted a mass of papers in both hands and let it fall back in the case. Jestingly he said:

"You can answer all those, to begin with."

It was then that Buddy was struck by a brilliant idea, one of those imbecile inspirations untempered by reflection that had led him to many a shipwreck.

"Tonio," said he, "you were sent by the *Bon Dieu*. I'm going to England to-night. You stay here in this suite. Get a typewriter. Answer all these letters and any others that may come. Say: 'Dear Sir or Dear Madam, or Dear Sirs or Dear Madams'—or whatever you like—'with reference to your letter of the second ult., I have to say that Sir Atherton Drake's precarious health has compelled him to winter in Greenland, and he has left me strict instructions that no correspondence should be forwarded. On his return I will hand him your letter. I am, Dear Sir or Dear Madam, or Dear Sirs or Dear Madams, yours faithfully, Antonio Gaffarelli, Private Secretary.'"

Tonio, throwing his memory back to his careless, down-at-heel and curiously beloved friend, now apparently a "swell guy" of an Englishman, with a title and much money, but still, in all essence, the selfsame man, said shrewdly:

"You are playing some game, Buddy!"

Buddy stared at him for a few moments, and the mercurial gaiety faded from his face. The Fear gripped him. He sat down and lit a cigarette before replying.

"You're right. A hell of a game. In some ways it's a game of life or death. One of these days I may tell you about it; but not now. There's no time. But if you stick to me I'll stick to you. All you've got to do is to obey orders—see, Tonio? Most important orders. Vital! First, no one must ever know that you've seen me before. No one on earth must know I've ever been in America."

"I see," said Tonio, meeting his eyes which had grown somewhat haggard, "but who must I be?"

Buddy, recovering, rose to his feet with a laugh.

"Anyone you like. Stop! I know. You've been recommended to me by Mussolini—or the Commendatore Professore Cavaloaselli, of the University of Padova. I remember you said once you came from Padova. Good! You know nothing about me. *Capisce?* Nothing. And you've never been to America. Wouldn't have known there was such a place, hadn't you learned your English from a young fellow you were coaching in Syriac at the University of Padova."

Tonio put his hands up to his white hair and gazed at him open-mouthed.

"I see, but at the same time I don't understand, Buddy."

"If I help you, old son, which I want to do with all my heart, you've damn well got to help me," he repeated. "And the only way is to do as I tell you."

There was a rap at the door. Buddy crossed the room and opened it. There stood Diana. She marched in. Seeing Tonio, she said, with a little indrawn breath:

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Not a bit, my dear"—Buddy was debonair—"may I present Signore Antonio Gaffarelli?"

She nodded brightly. "How do you do?"

Tonio bowed respectfully.

"I've only come in for a moment on my way down," said Diana.

Tonio picked up his hat. "I will go now and come back later, if you will allow me."

"I couldn't dream of putting you to that trouble, Signor Gaffarelli. Would you mind waiting a short time in my bedroom? It's quite warm and comfortable."

He opened the door politely for Tonio, closed it upon him, and turned to face a questioning Diana.

"Who's that comic little object?"

"I'm thinking of engaging him as confidential secretary," said Buddy, with as much stiffness as he could assume. "He comes highly recommended by a friend in Italy."

"Why doesn't he wear a shirt?"

"I can't tell you, my dear. I wasn't aware of it. Possibly he lost it—put it on a racehorse. I don't know."

She began to laugh; then checked herself as her eye caught the monkeys on the mantelpiece. She stared at them.

"Good Lord, Atherton! What on earth are those?"

He cursed his folly in setting out the idiot array. He might have foreseen her casual entrance. He glanced coldly at the row.

"Monkeys!" he said.

"But why? Are you going mad?"

"No. I'm going to London. Won't you sit down?"

She sat down mechanically on the indicated chair.

"London? But what have those ridiculous things got to do with London?"

"Nothing," said Buddy, standing with his back against the fireplace, "as it happens, though there might be some coincidence. If you want to know, I bought them from a great gaunt fellow on the Boulevard. An Englishman—a cockney. He told me, and I've no reason to disbelieve it, that he had served in the Guards, the Grenadiers, during the War. As you know, I don't practise indiscriminate charity; I thought the best way to help him was to buy up the whole of his stock—at his own price. He was very grateful."

Diana shivered. "An Englishman, an ex-guardsman, selling toys in the Paris streets? What's the British Consul doing?"

"Keeping unemployable Englishmen out of England," replied Buddy severely. "This fellow, a great gaunt skeleton of a man, obviously a hopeless case—drink, drugs, everything you can think of—I helped him in the only legitimate way."

"You didn't offer to do anything else for him?"

"Certainly not."

Diana sprang to her feet, and her eyes flashed angrily.

"You're as hard as nails; I always said so. God help Muriel."

"I don't see what Muriel has to do with an outcast and perfectly unworthy Grenadier."

"You never see anything," said Diana.

"I only see," said Buddy, "that in that blue kit of yours, with its touches of russet and red which tone with your colouring, you look peculiarly charming."

"And you," she retorted, throwing back her head, "are peculiarly detestable."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"And you've not even asked why I took the trouble to come here to see you."

Buddy replied courteously:

"You've scarcely afforded me an opportunity, my dear Diana."

"I came to tell you they've found out what has given her this temperature. A damn piece of carelessness. Guibault fixed it this afternoon. You can go and see her to-morrow if you like."

"I'm glad; I'm relieved—immensely relieved," said Buddy, with hands extended towards her, "but, at the same time, I'm dreadfully sorry I'm off to London."

"Yes," her brow puckered. "You said some nonsense about London."

"I have to go to-night—via Havre—on most important business. No one crosses from Havre to Southampton in the depth of winter unless he's obliged to."

"Muriel will be disappointed, though I don't quite see why she should be," said Diana.

"You must give her my love and plead necessity."

"Oh, you make me tired," said Diana.

"You've said that once or twice before," said Buddy. "It's a pity. From you I always expect the original."

She moved angrily to the door. He accompanied her. She stood on the threshold.

"When are you coming back?"

"In a few days."

She went out and marched down the corridor, with her young, springing step. Something within him clamoured and shrieked. He overtook her in a few strides.

"Diana, I'm not really the icy brute, the cold-blooded fish, you think me."

She turned. "Then stay in Paris, be good to

Muriel, and help the poor devil that sold you the monkeys."

She marched on. Buddy went slowly back to his room. He released Tonio.

"My friend," he said, "I've had a beast of an interview. The only good that came out of it was that I convinced the lady that you were a British Grenadier."

CHAPTER IX

TONIO saw him off by the 5.55 at the Gare Saint-Lazare. The intervening hours had been devoted to a serious discussion of immediate plans. It would have been splendidly romantic to leave Tonio the occupant of his magnificent hotel suite, in charge of embarrassing correspondence. It would have gratified his sense of the elfin, the grotesque. But the elfin and the grotesque faded unpleasantly at the sign of danger. Diana was dangerous. Although she might be convinced that the vendor of monkeys was a British Grenadier, she would not cease to wonder why Buddy should employ as confidential secretary a comic little object who didn't wear a shirt. On her next meeting with Tonio, whether occasioned by chance, which was probable, or by design, which was more than possible —for Diana's methods were direct, and there were many things less unlikely than her calm intrusion on Tonio's privacy in the suite—she would certainly try to wrest from him the key to Atherton's mysterious behaviour. Romance must be sacrificed to common sense.

Far better to keep Tonio by his side, so that from the start he could train him in the way he should go. He clung instinctively to the newly found companionship of the faithful little man. He had not yet grown accustomed to the inevitable loneliness of the impostor. To Tonio he could talk of

common experiences and many adventures. Besides, he saw things from Tonio's point of view—the touch of the artist within him giving him its vision. Tonio, too, would feel a greater loneliness than before, after this sudden change in his fortunes. He wouldn't have the remotest idea of dealing with the fantastic position of the original absurd scheme. He would be miserable. And only God knew when he himself would be back in Paris, able to relieve him from his nebulous responsibilities.

So Buddy had made new plans. Tonio, amply provided with funds, must fend for himself that night, on the morrow must provide himself with shirts, socks, ties, suit-cases, and taking the four o'clock train from the Gare du Nord must arrive the next evening at Victoria. He would find a room booked for him at the Grosvenor Hotel.

Just as Buddy was stepping into the train, Tonio caught his arm.

"Do you mind, Buddy, if I cut my hair?"

Buddy grinned at him uncomprehendingly.

"Yes. For my profession it is good. It is easy to draw in the papers. It is publicity. But for a waiter, or a valet, or a private secretary"—he wagged a finger in front of him—"no, I should like to dressa the part. You would permit me—yes?"

His eyes were so pathetically eager that Buddy had no heart for laughter. He had been wondering what he should do with this conspicuous Zulu white *coiffure* attending him all over the world. He said seriously:

"Perhaps from that point of view it would be just as well, dear old chap. But aren't you robbing yourself of your individuality?"

"In this new life, to whom, except to you, am I individual? And you don't love me for my beautiful hair."

"No," laughed Buddy, squeezing his arm. "I love you for your beautiful heart."

"So I cut my hair and keep my heart fixed as it is?"

"Just that," cried Buddy, and he clambered up the steep steps into the train.

The train started. Buddy leaned back in his seat and smoked a cigar. Once more there was a respite from Fear. Life, spiritually uncomfortable, precarious, dangerous, yet had its compensations. At any rate, he had rescued one sweet and simple human being from the abyss. If to money was due the miracle of raising Tonio from the dead, it didn't matter how criminally that money had been obtained. That miracle alone justified any crime.

His thoughts went back once more to his own dreadful period of privation, to the little conjurer's selfless devotion. And that mercenary little bitch, Julietta! Even she was all pity and kindness. But for Tonio and Julietta he would most certainly have died; if not of pneumonia, at any rate of starvation.

He remembered Tonio coming into his room one day during his convalescence brandishing a white bottle filled with some repulsive brown liquid.

"Ah, Buddy, the doctor has just prescribed this. It will do you much good. Julietta bringa in a glass."

And, without even perceiving a flicker of a hand, he became aware of bubbling champagne poured out from a gold-necked bottle.

"I practise the trick on you. It is good. No?"

Yes. With Tonio as a screen, God had tempered the wind to the conscience of the shorn lamb. Damned good of God, thought Buddy.

Two days after his arrival in London, at half-past eleven in the morning, he found himself with Tonio, *fidus Achates* in perpetuity, at the railway station of

Ringwood in the New Forest. A car from the local garage awaited them. It was a mournful, misty, clammy December day. It had rained all night, and, before nightfall, it would rain again.

"It seems to me," said Buddy, as the car drove off, "that I hate this part of the country more than ever."

"In summer it must be beautiful," said Tonio.

"Might as well say, 'This is a beastly, filthy life here below, but think how lovely it'll be in heaven'."

Tonio shrugged his shoulders. "And why not?"

"It takes a thundering lot of religion to get real comfort out of the prospect," said Buddy.

Tonio smiled. "We will not argue about religion. I am a good Catholic. I believe what my mother and father and the priests taught me to believe. We used to talk about it long ago—you remember? But now to me, even in winter, all this is heaven."

He took off his soft, black felt hat, for the air in the closed car was warm. Buddy regarded him side-long. His close-cropped, grizzled head, his emaciated features, the result of privations, which accentuated the luminosity of his dark eyes, gave him the ascetic appearance of a monk. There was even a little baldish patch on the top of his crown, which might have been a tonsure.

Either by natural delicate intuition, or through the born showman's instinct, he had, in his own words, dressed for the part. As a scholar's confidential private secretary recommended by a Faculty of Scholars, he was perfect both in dignified austerity of attire and in simplicity of manner. To Buddy's great relief, Bronson had received him, without an eyelid's flicker of surprise, magnanimously discounting unfortunate foreign peculiarities, as the sort of person Sir Atherton was justified in having about him. The title of Professor, on which Buddy insisted,

greatly impressed Bronson. Tonio took it as a matter of course. As Professor Gaffarelli he had worked professionally for years. In those days, if any cunning, semi-witted person asked him of what he was professor, he would reply, "Of the art of prestidigitation. I give you lessons. My fee is fifteen dollars for an hour."

The car drove on through dripping pines, on moist roads between hedges that bounded misty fields wooded with forlorn black skeletons of trees, or along walls that, reinforced by thick evergreens, sheltered great country houses from profane eyes. In spite of the depression of a leaden sky and the omnipresent ooze of dank foliage, Buddy's heart fluttered with insular pride. Here was proclaimed at any rate the sacred privacy of the Englishman. Little like it in America, land of instinctive publicity.

Tonio broke the silence and said:

"Do you know what I think, Buddy? If I were up high—not too high—in an aeroplane, I think I should look down and see all this England laid out —how you say?—like patterns in a garden."

Buddy glowed. Tonio was shrewd, the very last fag end of a fool.

"England's a small country, my friend. And it has had a thousand years of civilization. It has had to be careful of its land. It can't afford wide, open spaces as you've got in America."

"That must be the reason," said Tonio.

The chauffeur sounded a warning horn. The car slowed down. They were between parallel walls each overtopped by evergreen underbrush and stark trees. On the left, a little way ahead, Buddy saw the pair of columns of an entrance gate. Prancing and kicking and shying in the road, some few yards from the gates, head on more or less to the car, was a young,

high-spirited horse ridden by as gallant a looking fellow—a man about his own age—as Buddy had ever seen. The chauffeur drew up to the roadside, stopped the car, cut off the engine. The full-blooded horse continued to play the devil. It reared, it kicked, it swerved towards the wall. It did everything in a horse's bag of vicious tricks except buck, which its poor fool ancestors had not taught it how to do. Its obvious aim was to rid itself of the man on its back and then bolt hell-for-leather. Buddy, who had known much about horses in his fruitful years, saw that the man was evidently trying a vicious, half-broken colt. He stepped stealthily out of the car, with the vague idea of rendering assistance in case of necessity. But he could only regard with admiration the man's perfect horsemanship. The horse reared again. The rider let the reins fall loose, swung his crop behind him and brought it down between the horse's ears. The horse dropped to its feet, shook its head for the astonished fraction of a second, then, under a rain of blows, started up the road at a controlled gallop.

Buddy re-entered the car, which moved on.

"The fellow can ride," he said to Tonio.

"What a difference there can be in the lives of people," the little man said reflectively. "The only thing I have ever ridden was a pig on a merry-go-round."

The car proceeded not fifty yards further, and stopped at a pair oi iron gates behind forlorn stone pillars on the other side of the road. An elderly, shabby man in gaiters emerged from a small lodge and opened the gates. He touched his cap as the car swung through into the avenue of leafless trees. A turn brought Buddy into sight of the house, before which the road forked into a circular carriage drive.

It was a weather-stained, late-Georgian, ugly

building, lying in a hollow, some good way below the level of the main road. There were many trees around it; on the north side a screen of funereal firs. The flower-beds, box-hedged, lay in winter desolation of mould. It was a small house, of an architecture so pretentious as to render it mean. Buddy hated it at first glimpse. The car drew up before the grand entrance, shallow, columned and pedimented. At the door stood a decent elderly woman in black dress and black apron. As Buddy alighted she said respectfully:

"I hope I see you well, Sir Atherton."

"Quite well, Mrs. Putterill, thank you," said Buddy who, in his astute way, had gathered necessary information from Bronson. "And this gentleman," as Tonio got out of the car, "is Professor Gaffarelli. Go in, my dear Tonio."

Tonio entered the house, followed by the housekeeper. Buddy lingered to give instructions to the chauffeur. He must wait to take them back to Ringwood for the late afternoon train. The chauffeur touched his cap. Then, before Buddy could turn, he smiled and jerked a thumb.

"He'll be breaking his neck one of these days, Sir Atherton."

"Who?" asked Buddy, his mind wholly occupied by his first impressions of Newstead Park.

"Why, the Squire, Mr. Flower."

"Oh—oh, of course," said Buddy. "It was a vicious young brute he was riding. Well, the 5.20 back to London."

He pushed back his hat, and stood for a while on the threshold of his house, a very greatly astonished man. That clean-run, good-looking fellow, that superb horseman was Horatio Flower, the husband of Muriel. She had forsaken him for Atherton. Mary pity

women, he thought, in his puzzlement. They were led, by God knows what, to do the most astounding things. Why should she leave this perfectly sound fellow—his soundness leaped to the eyes : one glance was enough—why had she left him for Atherton, Atherton, the dry, pedantic stick of a man ? This was not only his own possibly prejudiced conception of Atherton. It was the considered judgment of Diana that had been drummed most disagreeably into his head for the past few days. Wherein lay Atherton's sexual fascination ? Of course he had the advantage of outward appearance. Buddy, his double, had always prided himself on fairly good looks and an air of distinction. Yes, the outside of the twins might correspond, but the insides of them, all that goes to make personality, individuality, urbanity, amiability, sympathy, lunacy, the love of life, the love of laughter, the love of idiot things, were as remote each from the other as the soul of Bacon was from that of Rabelais.

Bacon. An intellectual fixed star for all time ; but in private life a fellow of filthy moral habits and a callous, financial crook. Why the parallel occurred to him he could not imagine. But there it stood. He must preserve the illuminating idea for further consideration. His present concern was to clear up, as well as he could, Francis Atherton Bacon Drake's private affairs. Yet, he thought as he turned into the entrance hall where Mrs. Putterill and Tonio were patiently awaiting him, there must be something wrong about a woman who could run away from such a gallant-looking fellow as Flower. He loved Horatio Flower at first sight—a man after his own heart. He sighed. Mrs. Putterill asked :

" At what hour would you like to lunch, Sir Atherton ? "

He turned to Tonio.

"One o'clock suit you?"

Tonio acquiesced. Anything would suit Tonio. He was living in Wonderland. He had not yet successfully reconciled the down-and-out Buddy of the seedy clothes with this *grand seigneur* who lived in palace hotels, luxurious London flats, vast houses in the country, with motor-cars, servants, all the great things of life at his careless command. The only point of reconciliation lay in the fact that, in spite of this change in fortune, Buddy remained the same warm-hearted, loyal, fantastically incomprehensible Englishman that ever he was, with always that compelling touch of distinction, the touch, in his little mannerisms and courtesies, of the aristocrat.

This conception of himself that had entered the soul of Tonio was a million miles away from Buddy's most fleeting and casual conjecture.

"There are good fires in all the rooms, except the bedrooms," said Mrs. Putterill. "I didn't think you'd want them there."

"Of course not. Lunch, then, at one, Mrs. Putterill."

She retired like a black ghost, through a green baize door at the end of a passage. Buddy stood with Tonio in a strange house, with the plan of which he must seem to be familiar.

"Let me show you round—the *tour de propriétaire*," he said, with a wave of the hand.

He felt a moment's unregenerate regret that he had brought Tonio. Solitary investigation would have been simpler. Tonio was shrewd. It might be a bit of a strain to explain satisfactorily a possible ignorance of details in the house's floor plan. But yet—Tonio's companionship was dear to the man self-condemned to great loneliness. Bronson had been impressed by the command that his flying visit to

London must remain secret. To all the English world he must be still in Paris. In London, whithersoever he went, Fear attended him, like the Black Care behind the rider in Horace. Tonio was a godsend. He could talk to Tonio, Tonio could talk to him. And Tonio was a man who had educated himself in all sorts of queer ways.

After all, he only had to open one door after another in a lordly way, and proclaim its significance. The plan of the house was of Georgian simplicity. There were three rooms on the entrance floor, opening into the central hall. Two on the right. One on the left, much of the space corresponding to the room on the other side being taken up by a pretentious staircase which obviously led to the drawing-room on the first floor. The room by the staircase was the dining-room with old, red turkey carpet and heavy mid-Victorian furniture. It had red walls and a few dingy oil portraits of departed members of some alien family. A depressing room. The windows looked out on the front. The room opposite the staircase was nondescript and forlorn. In the days when the house was inhabited by a family this was the den reserved for the master. The other room, once the morning-room, Atherton used as his library. Here there was more comfort and individuality. There were well-filled book-cases, a few good prints, comfortable chairs, a broad and well-appointed writing-table and a deep modern fireplace under whose brick arch a fire blazed cheerfully. In a panel between two book-cases, an iron safe was sunk into the thickness of the wall.

"This," said Buddy, "is my library."

Upstairs they came to the spacious drawing-room to which Georgian architects sacrificed the many amenities of a modern dwelling.

"This," said Buddy, looking around him and

shivering in the cold of chintz-covered, characterless furniture, in spite of a fire which burned in an old-fashioned grate, "is the great salon on what you call the *piano nobile*. As you see, it has six windows and runs the whole width of the beastly house. I hate it. I can truly say that I have never spent a quarter of an hour alone in this room in my life."

"But," said the awed Tonio, "it is a magnificent room."

Buddy shrugged his shoulders. "Since when do you think I've been in love with magnificence?"

They returned to the library. Tonio instinctively drew near the fire, and warmed his crooked hands. Buddy smiled. Tonio was driven to the glow by the deathly cold, depressing, clammy atmosphere of the place. No fault could be found with Mrs. Putterill, who evidently, with the help of a maid whom he had seen flitting through the baize door into the dining-room, kept the house in good and dry order. The fault lay in the low position of the house itself, in the gloom of depressing trees that cut off from the main rooms what light a miserable December day could offer, in the awful chill of the vast and unheated hall, in the draughts which this reservoir of cold air sent cutting through every open door, every space between door and carpet, every keyhole.

It was a horrible house, Buddy decided. His thoughts flew back to American terminology. What an advertisement: "Ideal Mortuary Home. Central Refrigerator. Telephone, Mould & Mildew, Expert Morticians, *MAU*Soleum 1234."

"The damned place gives me the creeps," he said. "That's why I'm going to sell it."

For the first time he felt himself in sympathetic touch with the Athertonian circle. Every member of it—Bronson, Edgar Fry, Selous, Diana, Muriel—

all had commended, either explicitly or implicitly, his proposal. But why had Atherton originally bought the place? Judging by the mid-Victorian furniture, he must have bought it lock, stock and barrel. Was it from ancestral workings in the blood, which led him blindly to reconstitute himself in landed estate, and thus regain the position of his forefathers thrown away by Sir Michael, beloved yet profligate progenitor? If so, why hadn't he married in the ordinary humdrum way and begotten an heir to the revived glories of the house of Drake? If he had estimated the worth of a Cora Blenkinsop at £7,000, and was prepared to face divorce proceedings and social upheaval for the sake of Muriel Flower—with the inference that these two women, at any rate, had looked on him lover-wise—surely he could have cast his handkerchief, his baronet's escutcheon of the Bloody Hand embroidered in the corner, at the feet of the assembled maidens of his acquaintance, in the certainty that one of them would have rapturously picked it up.

The more he thought of Atherton, the greater enigma did he become.

While engaged in these speculations he idly scanned the books in the shelves. Tonio stood silent, warming himself, his back to the fire. Buddy came across a block of Italian literature in beautiful bindings. He drew out a volume of an eighteenth-century edition of Boccaccio, exquisitely though immorally illustrated. He summoned Tonio:

"You must browse about here for a bit. I've business to see to."

His business was the safe. Its key or keys belonged to the awful bunch worn by Atherton, one of his heritages of discomfort. An obvious Yale lock facilitated his selection.

The safe door swung open and disclosed a mass of papers docketed in Atherton's orderly way, a large steel despatch-box, a miniature safe in itself, an ordinary door-key and a half-used cheque-book.

This cheque-book was the first thing he looked at. It was nearest his hand. He opened it carelessly, thinking it was issued by a local bank for the purpose of paying petty local expenses. But to his surprise it showed an account with a City branch of a London Bank, different from the one of which he was now a customer.

A curious omission in the carefully kept counterfoils struck even Buddy's casual eye. The date was on each, the credit balance brought forward, the amount of the cheque, then balance after deduction. But not one of the counterfoils bore a name. The cheques, of which more than half remained, were payable to "Bearer." Buddy sat down by the writing-table, somewhat puzzled, and turned over the counterfoils. The dates ran at fairly long intervals. The amounts were for round sums, from £100 to £500. The credit balance on the last counterfoil was £956 17*s.* 8*d.* Here and there on the counterfoils were notes of credit in odd money, presumably dividend payments. It was a disturbing cheque-book. Why payable to "Bearer" instead of "Order"? Atherton was the last man in the world to disregard the elementary precautions of banking credit without strong reasons. For, in spite of his long residence in America where the cheque system differs from that in England, he remembered this: that a crossed cheque can only be paid from the bank account of the drawer into that of the payee; that an uncrossed cheque to "Order" can only be paid across the counter if endorsed by the payee; that a "Bearer" cheque, so long as the signature is genuine, is paid over the

counter to anyone who presents it. A "Bearer" cheque might be made out to "Nemo" or "The Archangel Gabriel" and it would not concern the cashier of the bank, nor the manager of the bank, nor the hierarchy of directors. Thus it became obvious to Buddy, who did not lack ordinary intelligence, that these round-sum payments made to a blank line in the counterfoil must be made to one individual person who would not have to sign his or her name on the back of the cheques. It was the way of the blackmailer. Buddy remembered the vulgar letter in block capitals.

Yes, that horrible, half-exhausted cheque-book stank of blackmail. Atherton couldn't have the horrible creature, male or female, presenting his "Bearer" cheques at his bank in Hanover Square, where he was a familiar figure of social, political and moral importance. He must send him or her to the branch, Lothbury, E.C., of another bank where, save for identification of signature, he was a sheer impersonality.

Buddy swore deep and silent. Were unsuspected waters about to encompass him?

He returned to the safe and took from it the armful of docketed papers and threw them on the table.

Tonio turned from fascinated dipping into the Boccaccio with whom he was entirely unacquainted.

"Can I help? Am I not your secretary? Let me."

Buddy smiled and waved an indulgent and repressive hand

"Not yet, old chap. You have a good time while you can. Possibly there's a hell of a time coming."

The little man started. He was sitting on an old oak coffin-stool, the beautiful volume on his knees.

"True?"

"As true, my dear man, as anything in this unveracious world."

Tonio, not attuned to paradox, but reassured by Buddy's smile, resumed his first perusal of the immortal story of the Nightingale. Buddy went through the papers.

For one on edge to discover elements of mystery, crime, romance, they afforded disappointment. As their outer endorsements proclaimed, and as their casual examination proved, they were all concerned with negotiations for the purchase of Newstead Park, and its subsequent upkeep. Among them was a plumber's receipted bill for £1 6*s*. 3*d*. Of the contents of the safe there remained only the despatch-box which could hold any further item of interest. This was closed by two spring locks. On his detested bunch hung no corresponding keys. This was puzzling.

There was an oak chest, quite a good, early seventeenth-century oak chest, with a cushion on top of it, standing under one of the windows. He opened it. It was stacked with manuscripts and typescripts. He drew out one at random. It was a manuscript neatly bound in stout pliable paper. On the outside was inscribed, in Atherton's handwriting, "Plotinus —His Accomplishment and Failure."

He dug deep and fished out another carefully bound clump of pages, this time in typescript, "Socrates and Socialism. An address delivered to the Middlehampton Conservative Club, by Sir Atherton Drake, Bart." Luckily there was no date. He called:

"Tonio."

The little Italian abandoned his Boccaccio and crossed to his employer, who thrust the typescript into his hands.

"You see what a hell of a fellow I am!"

It were best to take the bull by the horns, to accustom

Tonio to the conception of a Buddy Drake as a personage of Athertonian importance. He left his confidential secretary turning over the incomprehensible pages. Then his eye struck a thin row of slim volumes elegantly bound in green crushed morocco. Below the titles ran the name of the author, "Atherton Drake." He drew one from the shelves, "Phaon," and handed it to Tonio, who glanced at it reverently.

"Did you really write this, Buddy?"

Buddy clapped him on the shoulder and laughed.

"No. It was another fellow of the same name."

He put back the volume and returned to his digging in the trunk, while Tonio resumed his Boccaccio.

His search revealed nothing of personal interest, the papers, however, must be removed before the sale of the house. The packing would provide Tonio with elegant occupation.

He went upstairs and discovered Atherton's austere bedroom in which, after careful search, he found nothing beyond toilet odds and ends and a few old suits of country clothes. These he must tell Bronson to regard as perquisites. Other bedrooms were vaguely furnished, and their drawers were bleakly void. He went down to the warm library, shivering with the damp and cold of the cheerless house.

Mrs. Putterill came in. Could she telephone for Mr. Smithers, who was anxious to see him about various affairs? He remembered the name. Smithers was the local builder and contractor.

"Smithers," said Buddy, "is the last person in the world I want to converse with. I can't stand him to-day."

She pleaded a leaking roof in the lodge.

"Putterill says——"

"Why can't he say what he wants to say to Smithers

direct? He and Smithers can arrange things between them."

"If you'll let him do that, Sir Atherton," she replied, somewhat taken aback, "why, it'll be quite all right."

From her obvious surprise, he gathered that Atherton was not in the habit of delegating authority. Mrs. Putterill looked for fussiness and met lofty scorn of detail. He regarded her sternly.

"Of course Smithers knows that I'm not going to pay a hundred pounds for a few loose slates."

"I think you can trust Putterill, Sir Atherton."

"I hope so," said Buddy. "Meanwhile have we got downstairs a good packing-case or two? I'm having these papers sent up to London."

There were packing-cases. Putterill would bring them up after lunch.

"Tonio," said Buddy, "this is how you'll begin your secretarial duties."

"It's about time I begin to earn my salary," replied Tonio.

They lunched—by no means badly: scrambled eggs, roast chicken and sausages, apple-dumplings, a bottle of champagne, good coffee and old brandy.

The lonely key which Buddy had found in the safe had turned out to be the key of the cellar, which no one, as he surmised, but the master must open. He had descended, accompanied by Mrs. Putterill, and made his choice of bottles. It was a well-stocked cellar. He sighed at the thought of its abandonment to the possibly vulgar.

Here again was a sign of Atherton's incomprehensibility. He could live in this hideously furnished house, apparently with pleasure; he could devote his intellectual energies to the austerities of transcendental philosophy; he could insist on personal control of every farthing of his income; he could have the

reputation, as Diana flamboyantly proclaimed, of dry-as-dust priggishness, of unemotionality, even of hardness of heart, of inability to recognize a joy of life even when it insisted on staring him in the face; and yet—and yet—there was Cora Blenkinsop, there was Muriel herself, and, to come down to lower appetites, there was the delicate cuisine of Mrs. Bronson, the excellent plain cooking of Mrs. Putterill, and lastly—matter of psychological significance—there was an excellent selection of varied liquors in the small cool cupboard of the Park Lane flat, and there was this perfect cellar here of choice vintages. Buddy recalled the saying long ago of some wise and distinguished friend of his father's, "No bad man could love good wine."

Atherton was an enigma. Also, all the more in this respect, Diana had never pretended to credit him, Buddy, with so dainty and human a quality as connoisseurship either in vintage or in gastronomy.

Buddy ate his eggs, pondering these matters. What could be the answer to the enigma? Apart from his scholarship, which, as far as ignorant Buddy could judge from outside tributes, appeared to be genuine and sound, wasn't it that Atherton was a colossal fraud, thin, tenuous, but still mounting skywards, commanding, a colossus of fraud who made up in imposing height that which it had not in bulk?

Yes. Atherton was a fraud. He was a bad man. A self-manufactured man. Buddy's psychological analysis grew muddled as he ate the scrambled eggs. He was recalled to pleasant, mundane affairs by Tonio, who, raising his glass of Krug 1911, the greatest wine of that *annus mirabilis*, to his lips, and, pausing as it reached his nose, suddenly cried:

"But say, Buddy, this is champagne, I know. We have often drink it together. But I not ever knew

it could smella like this. Ah! It is like what my father and mother would tell me about Italy. 'Here in America,' they used to say, 'no one can smell anything. The air is poisoned with gasolene. But in Italy you have a thousand smells,' and they would tell me of the smell of the wine that came out of the tubs when the feet of the peasants crushed the grapes. I didn't believe them, but I love all nice smells. There are the old kinds of roses and gardenias, and, in South Carolina and California, the little smell of garlic. Oh, that is good, Buddy! I have a nose. Sometimes it hurts me. I smella smell. I say: 'Good God,'" —he smote his brow violently—"and my friends say, 'What's the matter?' They can't smell it. But me. . . . And that's what I mean. . . . Never have I thought of such perfume for wine."

Said Buddy, glass to lips:

"It's a curious thing—heredity. Here are you, a Latin, born in America. All good drinking years, so to speak, spent in a dry, bootlegger-ridden America. And you come to Europe for the first time and instinctively you recognize one of God's greatest gifts to mankind. Tonio"—he pledged the little man, whose dark eyes glowed at the tribute—"we're closer brothers than ever."

After lunch they went back to the library. A couple of stout packing-cases with covering boards, nails and hammer scrupulously laid out—the work, as Buddy had gathered during the meal, of the untidy Putterill—confronted them. Buddy set Tonio to his task, and looked idly out of the window. The sky had grown less leaden and the pale gleam of a veiled, watery sun spread over the lawn and trees. He might as well, he thought, stroll round the property while it was still in his possession.

"What we gonna do with them when they're packed?" asked Tonio.

"They'll be sent by goods train to London."

"And this?" Tonio pointed to the despatch-box.

"We take that with us," said Buddy.

Again he examined the safe. Its smooth steel surfaces forbade the hypothesis of a secret receptacle wherein the missing keys could be hidden. This great locked iron box worried him. He felt certain that its contents were connected with the disturbing cheque-book now in his pocket, that they would reveal secrets of Atherton's life which he had been at some pains to hide. And where were the keys? That Atherton could be so careless as to lose anything was inconceivable. He determined to send the Bronsons off on a joy-ride to any happy December far-away spot they could think of, and devote a whole day to turning the Park Lane flat upside down.

He put on hat and coat and went into the open air. He walked fast, his still young muscles needing exercise. His mind was preoccupied by thoughts of the baffling despatch-box. It was no trumpery thing to be ripped up with a sardine-tin opener, or hammer and chisel. A burglar's acetylene burner would be needed. At what kind of shop could he buy a burglar's acetylene burner?

At this stage of his reflections he found himself staring at his own front gates. A little way down the road stood the front gates before which the gallant horseman had mastered the refractory colt.

Then suddenly he was inspired by one of his lunatic ideas.

CHAPTER X

HE crossed the road, entered the gates and strode up the drive which mounted to a dark, red-brick Queen Anne manor-house. Here were evidences of care and love. The very ivy looked as if it loved the walls. There were well-kept lawns, trimmed yew hedges enclosing probably a rose-garden.

The house had a wide and gracious front. The main entrance, at the side, was equally gracious. The gravelled path looked as though it had been rolled but half an hour before. The steps were of welcoming cleanness. The mat and brush-fitted scraper compelled, with a courteous air of suggestion, the muddy visitor to make his entry with unstained feet.

Buddy rang the bell. The door was opened by a middle-aged man, a class-replica of Bronson. His mouth opened foolishly when he saw Buddy. He gasped:

"Sir Atherton. . . ."

"Yes. It's me all right. Is Mr. Flower in?"

"Mr. Flower's in, but begging your pardon, Sir Atherton"—the man was flustered—"I don't quite know——"

"But I know," said Buddy. "There has been all sorts of talk about me. You're afraid if you tell Mr. Flower I'm here he won't receive me. Well, you needn't—see? Where is he?"

"In the study, Sir Atherton."

"Well, take me to the study, open the door and announce me." He laughed at the man's embarrassed face. "You're afraid again. It's as much as your place is worth, I suppose. Mr. Flower will dismiss you. He won't. There's been a ghastly misunderstanding, my good——" He snapped his fingers and tapped a regretfully forgetful head.

"Smith, Sir Atherton."

"Of course. But I've been so worried. Look here. If you get into any trouble I'll see you through it. Honour bright. But you won't."

Smith, the butler, sighed. He knew that his master disliked Sir Atherton Drake exceedingly, especially since Mrs. Flower had gone off to live her own non-conjugal life in strange places. But, still, who was he to refuse Sir Atherton Drake admittance? A Sir Atherton bearing an explanatory olive-branch in his hand. He hesitated.

"Ten pounds, anyway. And a hundred if you're asked to find a new situation."

Smith's brain began to whirl. This was a Sir Atherton Drake either in masquerade, or a real Sir Atherton whom he had never before appreciated. He yielded.

It was a beautiful house, soft-carpeted, picture-hung, with bits of restful old mahogany furniture in the warm corridor.

Smith threw open a door.

"Sir Atherton Drake, sir."

Buddy had a confused first impression of a comfortable room, a country-bred man's room: sporting prints, a picture or so of a horse, well-stocked bookshelves, piles of magazines on a side table.

The rider of the morning, still in riding kit, glanced up from a writing-table where he sat, examining something through a magnifying-glass—postage stamps,

as Buddy saw later—and then sprang to his feet, magnifying-glass in hand.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

He was a fair, heavily built man, who had evidently kept himself in physical fitness, with crisp hair and blue eyes that blazed anger.

"I've come to bring you to your senses," said Buddy.

Flower exploded, as Buddy expected him to do. It was only natural. Flagrant co-respondents are not received mellifluously by outraged husbands. Buddy, hands on hips, regarded him unemotionally.

"Clear out, I tell you. Damn you, clear out! I don't want to lay hands on a sick man, but, by God, if you don't go, I'll throw you out."

"Try," said Buddy.

The infuriated man thrust out an arm. Buddy gripped his wrist with one hand and the other hand gripped beneath the elbow. Flower gave a gasp of pain and his eyes stared in horrified terror.

"Don't move or your arm'll be snapped like a stick. I learned this from a Japanese acrobat in Seattle."

He released his rueful opponent who said, mystified:

"What are you talking about?"

"You haven't given me a chance to tell you."

"That's that beastly jujitsu," said Flower, rubbing his arm.

"I suppose so. It's the only trick I learned and it came off, didn't it?"

Horatio Flower passed his hands over his eyes. Atherton Drake taught jujitsu by a Japanese acrobat in Seattle! He was launched into the phantasmagorical. Buddy pointed a finger.

"You went through the War, didn't you?"

"You know damn well I did."

"So you know what this is," said Buddy, peeling

himself to the knee and disclosing a broad white scar on his calf. "Not a vaccination mark, is it? That's shrapnel, and a bloody nasty bit of shrapnel at that. If you'd like me to take off my shirt I could show you the marks of a machine-gun bullet back and front, right through me. Say the word and I'll strip."

Horatio Flower came forward and looked savagely into his eyes, while Buddy smiled.

"Who the blazes are you? I could swear you're Atherton Drake, but he was never in the War and never went to America—as far as I know. Anyhow, he wasn't the sort of blighter that would learn jujitsu on the Pacific coast. Who are you?"

"That's what I've come to tell you, my dear fellow," said Buddy, "at my own very personal peril. As I said, you won't give me a chance. I happen to be a man with some muddled sense of honour. I saw no way out of a hideously fantastic situation till half an hour ago. First, disabuse your mind of the notion that I'm Atherton Drake."

"Now I see you're not," cried his involuntary and humbled host. "Oh, do sit down."

He drew hasty chairs to the fireside.

"Once more, who are you?"

"Brotherton Drake, Atherton's twin brother."

Flower started forward in his chair.

"You're a fraud. Brotherton Drake died more than a month ago."

"How do you know?"

"His death was announced in *The Times*."

"That's quite so," said Buddy. "I had the announcement put in myself. This is a free country. If a man can't put in a notice of his own death in a newspaper, what can he do?"

"Is that why you didn't introduce yourself here under your own name?"

"Obviously," said Buddy. "May I smoke a cigarette?"

"Sorry," said his host, handing him a box. He lit a cigarette himself. "And what does your brother —Atherton—say about it?"

"I'm afraid it's beyond the wit of man to conjecture," said Buddy gravely. "You see—Atherton's dead."

Flower regarded him in blank incredulity.

"Dead?"

Buddy made a little confirmatory gesture, followed by one claiming attention.

"I told you just now I've come here at my own peril. When you've heard what I've got to say I'll be at your mercy. But I think you'll appreciate my motives, anyhow. I spoke of a difficult situation. Believe me, if I were just a filthy adventurer—oh, I'm Brotherton Drake all right, seventh baronet and everything—if I hadn't some human feeling left, nothing would have been simpler for me than to go off with plenty of money in banks and pockets, to any old place across the seas, and leave you all planted here to stew in your own juice."

"*Us* all?" cried Flower.

"You and the charming lady who is your wife."

Again Flower sprang from his chair. He threw his cigarette end into the fire. Buddy rose too.

"What have you to do with my wife?"

"Theoretically everything, but practically, thank God, nothing."

"I wish to Heaven you'd explain what you're talking about."

"It's simple—in a way," said Buddy. "Listen. That announcement in *The Times*. It wasn't Brotherton who died. It was Atherton. Sit down, please. It's a story that'll take some time in telling."

He told him ; began with his abduction of Atherton's betrothed ; sketched his foolish vagabond life in America ; came to his return to England with £6 8*s.* 7*d.* for all his fortune ; and then narrated the quick, subsequent events : his visit to Atherton ; Atherton's death ; his crazy impulse to change identities and, in the dead brother's clothes, to step into the dead brother's fortune.

" From the first, you see, I fooled not only the manservant Bronson, but Dr. Selous, the officials at the bank, and Atherton's solicitor. I fooled your man, Smith, and you yourself when I broke into this room."

Flower had sat all the time, elbow on arm of chair and chin in hand, his brows knit, his blue eyes, keen and hard, a trifle crossed. Buddy recalled another man of the same curiously English type, a man whom he loved, a colonel of his battalion in the War, who sat and looked just like that, when bad reports came in, or when he was examining a Boche prisoner. It was mainly the suggestion of cross-eyedness or squint that threw Buddy back to the years of issues of life and death.

" And then ? " he asked without moving.

" And then," said Buddy, " I had S O S calls from a lady I had never heard of. In common decency I had to take some notice of them. I went to Paris."

" You went to Paris ? You saw her. My wife ? "

" What else could I do ? "

" Did she take you for Atherton ? "

" She did."

Flower stamped about the room, his hands doing silly things with his hair.

" And you didn't tell her who you were ? "

" Certainly not."

" You damned scoundrel ! "

"Oh, cut that out," cried Buddy angrily. "Talk sense. If I were a damned scoundrel I shouldn't be here. I saw your wife for about ten minutes in a nursing-home, after a ghastly operation."

Flower wheeled round and stood stock-still. He echoed:

"Operation?"

"That's what I said. A very serious operation. How could I spring the whole of this fairy story on her? Give me credit for common sense, man. I saw her for a few minutes two or three days ago. Since then she has had some sort of relapse and is dangerously ill."

Flower stood before him with a ghastly face.

"My God!"

"So ill," said Buddy, "that there was no chance of seeing me—the ghost of Atherton—for some days. That's why I came back to London. There were divorce proceedings . . ."

The anguished man waved away such petty considerations.

"Do you mean that Muriel is in danger of her life?"

Buddy seated himself on a corner of the old oak refectory table at which Flower had been working on his stamp collection.

"I wouldn't go as far as that," said he. "But she's a very sick woman."

"Why did nobody tell me?" cried Flower.

"I don't know," replied Buddy. "How can I? I've butted into this complication unawares. I've never struck a hornet's nest, but I fooled about with a wasp's nest when I was a small boy and they had to put me to bed for a week."

Horatio Flower, caring nothing for Buddy's discomfiture, asked:

"Where is she?"

Buddy gave him the address of the nursing-home.

"She has everything, I assure you, that modern science and skill can offer. Her sister, Diana, is with her."

"Diana—so you know Diana, do you?"

His lips twitched for a second in an ironical smile.

"I met her for the first time in Paris. Perhaps I had better fill in things."

Which, feeling for the instant in command of the incredible situation, he proceeded to do. With his gift of the histrionic, Buddy should have established himself as a great actor. He dramatized his first meeting with Diana, their talk, their dinner at Fouquet's, so that the duller yet responsive man, in spite of dreadful preoccupation, stood held in the grip of the narrator.

Then there was a long silence. It was broken by Flower, his hand on the bell-push, asking curtly:

"Have a drink?"

"With great pleasure," said Buddy.

Another silence until the butler answered the summons.

"Whisky or brandy?"

"A brandy and soda, please," said Buddy.

Again a silence until the drinks were brought and the butler had retired.

"Here's luck," said Flower, lifting his glass.

"The same," said Buddy.

Flower set down his glass on a table. His honest fair face sagged in pathetic dubiety.

"What am I to do?" he asked simply.

Buddy's heart leaped within him. Here was a side of the man's character on which he had, now he came to think of it, only subconsciously counted. This honest fellow was still in love with his not too con-

siderable a wife. Muriel was ill, at death's door. That was all that seemed to matter. If only Flower would take Muriel off his hands, all would be gloriously well.

"I should think the first thing to do would be to realize the impossible position in which Mrs. Flower and I are placed with regard to each other."

Flower turned away. "Of course I realize it. It's obvious."

"When I started in on this idiot game I never dreamed that anyone would be hurt by it," said Buddy. "How could I guess—with a man like Atherton? I've got to hurt Mrs. Flower somehow. You see that, don't you? The question is: how can I hurt her least? I'm desperately sorry."

"Why didn't you tell her all this—what you've told me?"

"Don't forget she's very ill. I might have told Miss Merrow, who would have broken it to her gently. But that would have been rather dangerous. For any good to have come out of it you would have had to be told, in any case. And, once my secret was common property, the Public Prosecutor would step in and rightly accuse me of all sorts of crimes and felonies, and send me to penal servitude for God knows how many years! You see I'm up against it."

Flower gave a short laugh, not very mirthful, and stood, hands on hips, his back to the fire.

"I suppose you are. And, by throwing yourself on my mercy as you call it, you expect me to say nothing about your imposture. In fact, to compound a felony."

"That's exactly what it comes to," said Buddy.

"Suppose I agree, what then?"

Buddy stepped from the corner of the table to his feet.

"You can't in decency bring divorce proceedings

against me—a dummy—with no possible defence, and with only two alternatives after the divorce is granted —in either of which I should be an unutterable swine —either to marry or not to marry the lady."

An angry flush rose to the other man's face. He gripped his jacket with each hand. Buddy admired him standing there, typically English, outwardly restrained yet inwardly a cauldron of passions and loves and hatreds. A man in whom circumstances had deadened the impulses that differentiate the individual from the type. A man of inherited traditions, fine and noble, instinctively followed. Even the War, with its shattering of human values, had left this solid, English country squire unchanged. The War had merely compelled blind obedience to the sacred and unquestioned traditions that for centuries had been the guiding principles of his race. He had no part in the modern neurotic world.

Buddy said quietly, meeting his eyes :

" You see you'll have to withdraw these divorce proceedings at once."

He turned and moved to the window and looked out at the sweep of lawns and the majestic outlines of leafless oak and elm. Far away to the right rose a dim ridge melting into the now leaden sky. A prospect of calm, uninspiring restfulness ; the prospect, thought Buddy, on which this man's spiritual life was based. He himself was of the same country-side ; born and bred not forty miles away. His father was of the same Hampshire type. The rural blood of a grandmother must have worked in him so that he became, perhaps unfortunately, individual. How to account for Atherton ? Well, there was their mother—acidulated essence in a rich and sluggish south-country English blood. He himself ? He had knocked about the world, and the world had knocked him, and cir-

cumstances had killed all the sacred fetishes with the cold laughter of ridicule. Still, he knew their potency. That was why he was looking out of the window, leaving Horatio Flower to deal with them.

His mind worked along bypaths of idle speculation. Why should this splendid fellow be cursed by the bombastic name of Horatio? It was idiotic, un-English, out of their sacred tradition. Then it occurred to him that it was the Christian name of one of the most illustrious of Englishmen—Nelson. He gave it up, as he had given up many problems before.

He heard himself called:

"Drake!"

He turned.

"What made you think I'd do all this that you ask me?"

"For one thing—the way you rode that beast of a colt; and for another——" He paused.

"Well?"

"It's very intimate. I think it. I'm sure of it. But till I've your permission I won't say it."

Flower regarded him with hard eyes and a set face.

"You can say exactly what you like."

"You're madly in love with your wife."

The other made a little noise in his throat, signifying assent.

"So that if I fade out of her horizon, which the withdrawal of proceedings will allow me to do—I don't say gracefully, that's where I must have a bad mark against my name, and I don't say without wounding a woman's pride—at any rate you'll have the whole field to yourself for a reconciliation, if you want one, which I think you do."

"All right," said Flower, as if he had been told to command a raid on enemy's trenches in broad daylight.

"Forgive my treading on such delicate ground," said Buddy.

"You had to. Perhaps I'm grateful. I don't know. This sort of thing rather upsets a man. Well, that's that. Let's talk of something else. What are you going to do?"

Buddy replied more or less vaguely, for he had no plans beyond flight from England. He was selling Newstead Park, at any rate.

"I'm glad of that," said Flower.

"Helps a bit, doesn't it?" said Buddy, with his humorous smile.

Flower relaxed into a laugh. After a while he said suddenly:

"Would you like to come round to the stables and look at that colt?"

Buddy loved him. He was about to accept the invitation rapturously when he felt the touch of the cold finger of prudence.

"I'd love to. But perhaps better not. Also perhaps it would be better if no one knows I've been here."

Flower nodded. "I see. It's difficult to remember that you're the other fellow all the time."

"Besides, I must be going." He picked up his hat. "I'm catching the 5.20 back to town."

Flower moved to the door. "I'll see you out."

"Don't," said Buddy. "Ring the bell. I'll find my way to the front door, where your butler will see me off the premises. You won't curse him, will you, for letting me in?"

"Of course not."

Buddy laughed. "Well, as for thanks, you've got to imagine them. They're too many and too deep for me to express. Good-bye."

Flower opened the door and put out his hand.

"If things weren't so impossible I'd say I hope we'll meet again."

"That's kind of you," said Buddy. "But, after all, who knows?"

Buddy marched on air over the carpeted corridor. At the front door stood the butler.

"You'll not be dismissed, Smith," said Buddy. "So you lose. Anyhow, here are the two fivers I promised you."

Smith shook his head wonderingly as Buddy disappeared at a turn in the drive. This was a new Sir Atherton who danced to the fluttering of five-pound notes.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Buddy returned to London, Fear crouched behind him, an almost physical presence, something small and obscene; now and then he felt its clammy touch on his neck. He recalled the steps of his unspeakable adventure. The desperate plight of his degradation growing deeper week by week. His brother's cold hatred. The irresistible temptation. The wild frenzy of yielding to its drama. The subsequent acting of it. The thrill of success. The carelessness of confidence. Then Muriel and the approach of Fear. Diana and the leap of his heart towards her gay splendour; the one woman in the world, since the far-off day when Mona died, who had flashed over his soul all that woman should be—all, at any rate that woman meant to him—love and loyalty and understanding and comradeship; and passionate response could he but evoke it. Unguarded moments, quick realization of danger, foolish efforts to make Atherton tear off the Athertonian mask and reveal himself as a robust, life-loving human being. Consciousness of failure. Fear clinging tighter and tighter to him. The clammy paw was now just behind his ear. He brushed it away half-consciously whenever he felt it.

It was a more malignant and obscene Fear than ever which hag-rode him on his return.

He had delivered his secret into another's custody. He did not fear betrayal. To a man like Horatio

Flower it would be the secret of the confessional. Buddy lay awake of nights trying to explain to himself his unquestioned faith in this much-wronged, honourable man. He could only conclude that Flower was far above him in the scale of humanity. Up to a certain parting of the ways they had both been trained in the same traditions of English life: proud birth, public school, university, war—both, on broad lines, *pari passu*. And then the break. Was it circumstance or character?

Buddy, honest with himself, knew that it was character. Would Flower, confronted by such a temptation as his own, have yielded? Never. Buddy abused himself. Wasn't there something in the Bible about Reuben? "Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel." That was himself, Buddy Drake.

The touch of the Fear set quivering all sorts of unsuspected nerves.

Here was a man, born to be his blood brother—the blood brother of Buddy, say, in 1917—the fine flower of country England, who must regard him as the most damnable and sneaking scoundrel in the world. Buddy was not deceived by his eventual friendliness. Their relations were fantastically abnormal. Even the pathetic gesture implied in the invitation to visit the colt was that of the shy child, "Will you come out and see my rabbits?"

It was horrible. Here was a man after his own heart who must, from every standard by which he had been born and bred, regard him as the scum of the earth, knowing him as an impostor.

Then there was another human creature. . . .

Good God! thought Buddy, lying awake in the quiet darkness of the Park Lane flat, was ever man in so paralysing a state of isolation? There were but three people in the world who were to him of

primitive concern. Three people only whose destinies mattered, insomuch as they were intertangled with his own: Horatio Flower, Diana, and the stray waif Tonio Gaffarelli. Not another living soul mattered.

Muriel? As far as she concerned him she was the dream of a shadow, the shadow of a dream, a meaningless wraith, although to the unhappy Horatio she was the woman of flesh and blood, infinitely desired.

In the obvious way of life Muriel walked, a gracious, hapless lady who had followed the most fatuous of fires into the wilderness wherein she now lay. To him she was the least interesting of ladies. He consoled himself by the thought that he had done his best for her.

But in his own phantasmagorically constricted life how could she count as a vivid personage?

Buddy shivered that night in bed under the cold little fingers of Fear. He could feel the tickling of the covering fur. He was monstrously alone.

And he was monstrously alone in a society wherein Atherton had moved as a well-known figure. Hitherto madman's luck had befriended him. *Fortuna favet fatuis.* It amuses the Lady to protect fools. But she tires of the game pretty quickly. He must trust her no longer. No more gay imprudences.

For the next few days he lived like a prisoner in the Park Lane flat. Again he impressed on Bronson the importance of secrecy. To callers, telephoners, he was still in Paris. Those importunately demanding his Paris address must be told that his stay in Paris was of uncertain duration. What Bronson thought of it all Buddy could not know, for Bronson took his orders with a grave face, as though occasional hiding from him had been one of Atherton's familiar habits. He spoke to Bronson as little as possible. Tonio, in official position, acted, whenever he could, as intermediary. Tonio played his part with unquestioning loyalty. He

was the newly engaged Italian secretary who had never seen Sir Atherton before. In the presence of Bronson at their sedate meals they played scholar and secretary so conscientiously that Buddy's nerves almost gave way. They exchanged commonplaces in French, which he hoped Bronson would take for Italian. Often, in order to escape from Bronson, he ate with Tonio in restaurants off the map of Athertonian London ; funny little places in Soho where Tonio was delightedly at home ; now and then in old City eating-houses of which Buddy proclaimed, perhaps mendaciously, the excellence of the good old honest English fare. Here, too, the chauffeur, accustomed to deposit Sir Atherton at the august steps of the Athenæum or, on occasions, at the Ritz or Claridge's, had to be considered. Buddy's strategic conduct of the car became a maddening ordeal of subterfuge.

The weather was the ordinary foul London December weather of fog and rain and mud. None but full-blooded lunatics would walk about the streets for pleasure, and only the needy must do it out of necessity. The notoriously invalid master of the car and of Bronson couid not walk in fog and rain and mud. Buddy, deprived of exercise, felt the threatening growth of all his bodily tissues, including his liver. It was a dog's life.

With Tonio's help he got through the mass of unanswered correspondence. Nearly all the answers obeyed a formula, modelled with sobriety and verisimilitude on his first airy sketch. What else could be done ? Pleading more neuritis than ever, he himself typed out a couple of colourless letters to Muriel, hating himself with all his heart. He had also to reply to telegrams from Diana which informed him of Muriel's strides along the path to recovery, and urged his immediate return to Paris. It was all heartrending,

confusing and informed with Fear. How would the poor lady bear the shock of the withdrawal of divorce proceedings ?

Edgar Fry rang him up. His solicitors and stock-brokers alone were allowed to know of his presence in London, and Bronson was ordered to put through their calls. Fry, whom in his new-found prudence he had not visited, reported a telephone conversation with Horatio Flower's solicitors. They had received instructions from Mr. Flower to withdraw the petition. Fry congratulated him on escape from absurd public scandal. When could Fry see him ? Buddy answered that he was very ill and couldn't see anybody, and was planning to get out of England for ever on the first fine day. Newstead Park ? Oh, yes. He had been down there and taken out all his intimate possessions, and the place could now be sold as it stood, lock, stock and barrel. Would he accept the offer ? Certainly. He was far too ill to cope with negotiations. If Fry would send him a power of attorney with regard to the sale of Newstead, he would sign it. The rest would concern Fry.

So far so good. The dreadful damp house was practically off his hands. He would think of it no more. Flower had kept his word. He awaited news from Paris.

Meanwhile the heavy steel despatch-box lay unopened on the library table. Unsuccessfully he ransacked the flat for keys. The more he looked at the box, the more sinister a casket did it appear. It contained something—of that he felt assured—that Atherton was impelled to keep, something that must remain, during his lifetime at any rate, in impenetrable secrecy. The more he thought of the mystery of the lost keys, the more was he convinced that they lay somewhere in safe custody.

At the Bank? He sent Tonio round with a guardedly written letter. The manager reported that a search in the strong room where Sir Atherton's securities, et cetera, were deposited, resulted in no discovery of keys. After a while in his careless way he set the despatch-box in a corner and tried to forget it.

Then there came the inevitable telegrams and letters from Paris.

Horatio has stopped proceedings. What is the meaning of it? DIANA.

This makes everything ten times worse than before. What is to be done? M.

A letter from Muriel which he had to glance through, hating himself all the time. It was vile to pry into the intimate secrets of a woman's life. But the pathetic appeal must be answered. He thanked God that at any rate it was vague and toneless, very much like Muriel herself as he had seen her in the sick-room.

The next day a telegram from Diana:

H. seems to have gone mad so am packing off M. in ambulance with D. V. to-night to Menton villa.

D. V.? Yes, that was Dolly Valentine, who seemed to share with Diana the responsibility of looking after Muriel. Diana had spoken of her on various occasions. But whether she was Miss, Mrs. or Lady, he had no idea. Nor did he know the name of the villa. "Dolly's villa" had been Muriel's projected destination.

Diplomatic correspondence in all these circumstances

was both delicate and fraught with danger. It took him a whole morning to compose a letter to Muriel which should be at once colourless and yet express some sort of decent human feeling. He wrote in the dark, for not yet, either from Muriel's letter or from Diana's telegram, could he gather the nature of Horatio's madness.

"We must get away soon, my dear Tonio," he said one afternoon. "This climate will be the death of me—and of you!"

"Me?" Tonio shrugged his shoulders. He had weathered the inclemencies of the New World winters, in New York, Chicago, Denver—every kind of a city in which snow and blizzards were as much commonplaces as sunshine in summer. Compared with them raw, foggy London was a comfortable Turkish bath.

"Where do we go?" he asked.

"South Africa is a warm place," said Buddy. "Why shouldn't we look into things there? That infernal car is even now at the door. Now there's something for you and Westover to do. Tell him to drive you to the Union Castle offices in—we'll find the address in the telephone book—and get all the information you can and see what are the earliest reservations you can make. Two cabins and a private bathroom."

The sudden idea amused and excited him. He sent off a Tonio only too desirous of secretarial employment. He accompanied him to the door with laughing instructions. The company must give him the best; otherwise he would build a fleet for himself and ruin the line. He called him back, while his hand was on the bell-push of the lift.

"Tell them I must have a suite with a private sitting-room."

Why not? Money mattered nothing. He would go out in state. As the lift mounted into view he called out:

"Charter the damned ship."

He was in one of his sudden ebullient moods. It was a gorgeous idea. South of the Equator! He would cross the Line. A touch of romance. Once across the Border, and the danger was left behind. He laughed and threw back the door.

He caught sight of a letter in the letter-box. He took it out. It bore no stamp; had been slipped in by the writer or by messenger. The address was typewritten. It contained a quarto page torn from a block, which was covered in manuscript with an arithmetical nightmare of figures. They were arranged in the form of fractions, with varying numbers of digits both in numerators and denominators.

Buddy sat down at the writing-table and pored over the mysterious document. Its nature could bear only three interpretations. It came from Bedlam or a cognate institution. It was the solution of some abstruse mathematical problem. It was a message in cipher. Now, it had too much method for madness; arithmetic had even less meaning to a mathematician than the alphabet to a poet; so, by process of elimination, it must be cipher. He could make nothing of it. During the War, he remembered, there were specialists attached to staffs who could decipher anything. He wished he had been on the staff and had learned their tricks instead of foot-slogging it in trenches where nothing useful was taught except how to suffer evil smells and regard vermin as God's creatures. But what was Atherton doing with cipher? Speculation being vain, he threw the paper into a drawer of the table and tried to forget all about it.

He had been but an hour seeking oblivion of the

cipher in a comforting drink and a detective novel, when the door flew open and Diana sailed in.

He had a fleeting vision of a scared Bronson framed in the doorway. He rose.

"I know," cried Diana. "I've made Bronson break orders. I felt you were in, somehow. At any rate he couldn't prevent my coming in and writing a note. So you must forgive him."

He shook hands with her and said gravely, prudently:

"Bronson should have known, Diana, that the *consigne* couldn't apply to you."

"But why the *consigne*? Are you playing hermit?"

"I'm by no means well," said Buddy. "And then —and then"—his imagination began to work— "everything has conspired to upset me. There are two or three men in my line, my subject, in London just at present, an American, a Swede and a German. They all think I'm an authority on Platonic philosophy and want to see me. I don't want to see them. I'm not equal to the strain of their intellectual vitality. They would bore me. I hate being bored."

She looked at him in her ironical way, sitting in the fireside chair to which he had invited her.

"Paris seems to be better for your health than London."

"Possibly," he said. Then abruptly, "How is Muriel?"

"All right. Quite out of danger. And now comfortably settled at Dolly Valentine's. I found a wire awaiting my arrival. Did you get one?"

Buddy nodded. He had received a telegram that afternoon:

Arrived safely not too tired. Love. M.

"Dolly will take good care of her."

"I'm sure she will. Cigarette?"

He handed her the box and bent over her with a match. She looked up with a polite smile of thanks. Buddy threw the match somewhat viciously into the fire. If eyes could thank so wondrously for a trivial act, what world of super-wonder lay hidden behind them!

"I came to you as soon as I could," she said, "to find out about things. Your letters haven't been illuminating."

Buddy replied that there was nothing he could illuminate. One week Muriel's husband filed a petition for divorce, the next he withdrew it. A disconcerting fellow.

"What do you propose to do about it?"

"What do you suggest?"

She laughed scornfully. "Both of you are different from me. Different, too, from poor old Horatio—although I don't like him. If I were a man in your romantic situation I'd take the woman I loved off to Fiji or anywhere, and tell the world to go to hell. And if I were a woman in Muriel's position, I'd expect it."

"I wonder if you would—really," said he.

She started on a note in his voice.

"What?"

He recovered himself quickly. "It's easy to say those things. But the conduct of human life must be governed by reason."

"Oh, Lord!" said Diana. She threw the end of her cigarette into the fire. "That's what Muriel says. A bit of a parrot, Muriel."

He gave her a swift glance, rose and walked about the room. There she sat, provocative, scornful, glowing, in some sort of dim-green kit, hat and all, which blended, as it were subserviently, into the colouring

of her face, her eyes, the wisps of dark hair at the temples below the brim of her hat. Her furs lay on a distant chair. He forgot everything for the moment but her marvellous perfection. He heard her voice, soft, deep, resonant :

" I wish you two people would explain to me the relation between reason and love."

He turned, forgetting Atherton.

" There isn't any ! "

Their eyes met, hers in challenge.

" Then why not Fiji ? "

He swept his hands over his eyes in a helpless gesture. Diana unconsciously saved him from folly.

" I can't understand you two. I never did. I wish to God I could. Love ? I don't know. For you two Love seems to be an aquarium with the water kept judiciously tepid."

An attitude was imperative.

He stood over her, outraged stick of a lover.

" You are insulting."

She shrugged carelessly. " Perhaps I am. Why shouldn't I be ? I love my sister beyond anything you can conceive in the way of love. I know she's a sentimental, weak little fool. She was all right with Horatio until you came along. Then you talked to her about Plato and Shakespeare and William James, and persuaded her to see what a poor mutt a man must be who lived for dogs and horses and postage-stamps and prize sweet peas and vegetable marrows. Oh, I know all about it ! "

" Then why did you side with me against Flower ? " he asked sharply.

She threw up her hand. " You're always asking for reasons. I don't know. Horatio never liked me. I was different from Muriel, I suppose. Too modern, perhaps. He belongs to the early nineteenth century

and likes his women to be of the period. Our first quarrel was over Jane Austen. I'm a heretic about Jane. I shiver with horror when I think that my great, or my great-great-grandmother was one of those ghastly females."

"Why ghastly?"

"Through the repression of their awful civilization. Their ideal was to be outwardly sexless. Their training taught them that sex impulses came from the devil, and any betrayal of them was the height of immodesty. Oh, my dear Atherton, I'm not going to give you a lecture on sex throughout the ages. I think I could if I tried to, and it'd shock you to the core of your incomprehensibly intellectual soul. But what I want to get at is this. Horatio's ideal is the Jane Austen female. I'm nothing at all like it. I'm quite a decent girl, Atherton, as you know. But I can't wear any damn silly veils making me half an Oriental slave and half a Virgin Mary, which Jane Austen's young men expected their wives to be. I expect a man to regard me sexually and intellectually in exactly the same way as I regard him. The only difference between us is the physiological fact that if we come together I bear the children; he doesn't. That's woman's disability—or ability if you look at it the other way round. And when I'm busy having babies, he's damn well got to be busy trying to support them. It's fifty-fifty on that side of life. It's clean common sense. I say 'clean.' Horatio and I differed on the meaning of the word. He has the master mind of his great-grandfather. He thinks me a young woman without any sense of morality. In fact, a scarlet young woman."

Buddy laughed. "I think you're a bit unjust to Horatio."

"Why?"

He replied deliberately:

"If he were the early Victorian sultan you describe, he wouldn't be trying to forgive Muriel, and—well, get her back. There can be only one reason for his present action."

"And you commend him—calmly, coolly, philosophically—just like that?"

"Perhaps," said Buddy, "it would be the best for our three lives."

She sat bolt upright. "So you throw her over?"

"I must give her time to reconsider her position."

"Then if Horatio followed her to Menton—he has already written her idiot letters—and said, 'Let us bury the past and begin all over again,' and she consented, you would take it lying down?"

He threw out his hands. "What else could I do?"

"My God!" cried Diana. She rose with a cruel laugh. "What a delicate, what a perfect lover! Good-bye, my friend."

She moved to the door, very scornful. He intercepted her and seized her wrists.

"I don't care a damn what you think of me. I wish to God I'd never seen Muriel. It was a nightmare of a mistake. It's you I want. You. From the very first time I met you. Now you know!"

He released her. She stared at him in shivering amazement.

"Have you gone mad?"

"Perfectly mad."

She recovered herself. There was challenge in her eyes.

"What do you expect me to do?"

He flung open the door.

"Go out and forget that such a born fool ever existed."

"I certainly shall," she said, her head in the air.

CHAPTER XII

TONIO, coming in a while later flourishing a flimsy plan of the "Carisbrooke Castle," found his employer sitting moodily in front of the fire.

"Everything you want in three weeks' time, but nothing before then," said Tonio.

Buddy looked up. "I want to go to-morrow. I want to start now."

"Impossible," said Tonio.

Buddy exhausted himself in vain oaths. More than ever was departure from England imperative. Three weeks—a lifetime! Anything might happen in three weeks. Tonio regarded him incomprehensibly. What had happened?

"I oughtn't to be allowed to go about loose," groaned Buddy. "I never thought I could make such a fool of myself."

Tonio's shoulders moved in a faint shrug. He had given up trying to understand the new and mysterious Buddy. He spread out the plan on the library table, and awaited Buddy's good pleasure.

Buddy rose, looked at the pencil-marked cabins with lack-lustre eye.

"Find out how long they'll hold the accommodation for us. There must be other places—Brazil, Australia—where one can get to, starting at once. Go round all the steamer offices the first thing in the morning."

Tonio looked at him out of his shrewd bright eyes.

"Tell me, Buddy, since you want to get out of England so quick, have you done anything wrong?"

"Everything I do seems more wrong than what I've done before," cried Buddy. "I'm up to my neck in mess."

And out of the mess he felt he could never extricate himself—not he, Buddy, with his lack of self-control. In one moment of passion, stung by a girl's scorn, he had forgotten all his fear-dictated resolutions. How, after his declaration in his natural voice and manner, could Diana mistake him for the barely tolerated Atherton? If Diana had not seen that he loved and wanted her in the good old human way, she was a fool of a woman. And a fool of a woman was the last thing on earth Diana could possibly be.

Anyhow, he had made it clear that he had done with Muriel. He tried to console his conscience that he had taken the only way out of a miserable and sorry affair. Diana must think of his conduct whatsoever she would.

At the same time, was Diana as outraged as her scornful exit implied? She had listened to him while he held her wrists, and had not wrenched them away in maiden indignation. He had released them unresisting of his own accord. He had plunged into the depths of her eyes, and below incredulous amazement he had not detected anger or hatred.

He went to sleep that night thinking of these things. In his own person of Buddy Drake why shouldn't he, why couldn't he win her? Sooner or later she would fall into the arms of some man, decent or otherwise. It was the way of nature. Why shouldn't he be the man? He was not too disfavoured to look upon. He had within him the elements of righteousness and sweet dealing, both with man and womankind. He

desired her madly. She knew it. To no man, clear of the taint of the satyr, who desires a woman madly, can the woman be absolutely indifferent. She must think of him in some sort of feminine way of her own.

He fell asleep, his head filled with crazily fantastic schemes. He awoke in the morning to disillusion.

At breakfast a new shock awaited him.

Tonio, who had conscientiously constituted himself the perfect secretary, came into the dining-room with the morning's correspondence.

"Here are two letters," he said, "which I don't understand."

They were tradesmen's letters, couched in the most respectful terms. There must, of course, be some mistake, as the enclosed cheques in payment of account had been returned dishonoured.

There were the cheques, two of them, hideously marked:

"No account. Refer to drawer."

Buddy stared at them. There was his ordinarily accepted signature, "Atherton Drake." The rest of the cheque was made out in Tonio's typescript. They were just commonplace payments to butcher and baker. He had turned over the bills to Tonio.

Then suddenly the heading of the cheques stared into his eyes. They were cheques issued, not by his companionable bank in Hanover Square, but by the Lothbury, E.C., branch of the bank in which Atherton had his mysterious account.

The primary solution of the problem was simple. He had thrown the Lothbury cheque-book into his drawer, cheek by jowl with the Hanover Square cheque-book. Tonio, ignorant but zealous secretary, charged with the making out of cheques for household expenses, had used the wrong cheque-book. He, Buddy, most careless of masters, had signed the

cheques without regarding the bank heading. So far it was all simple. But why, when Atherton's last counterfoil showed the clear credit balance of nearly a thousand pounds, should the cheques be returned dishonoured ?

There was no question of forged signature. Merely the bold announcement of " No account."

To explain matters to the bewildered Tonio was easy. He had ceased to be customer of the Lothbury bank long ago, and oughtn't to have left the useless cheque-book lying about. A line of apology accompanied by a cheque on the Hanover Square bank would satisfy the tradesmen. Tonio went away happy. But Buddy felt himself in the presence of a mystery ; possibly a sinister mystery.

Had Atherton kept his Lothbury bank account under an assumed name ? That could be the only solution. But why ? Buddy's mind began to move swiftly. The cheque-book and the steel despatch-box were intimately connected. The missing keys ? Why should they not be in the custody of the Lothbury bank, together with securities of which the dividends were noted on the counterfoils ?

He finished his breakfast, went to the library and examined the Lothbury cheque-book. The last payment had been made only two months ago and the amount had been carefully deducted from the credit balance. The number on the first cheque was next in sequence to that on the last counterfoil. It was inconceivable that the balance should have been withdrawn.

He was about to throw the cheque-book into the drawer when his eyes met the typewritten sheet of unintelligible fractions. It became at once part and parcel of the general mystery. In the corner of the book-case the blackened steel box stood ironically

defiant. He took it up and laid it on the library table. It was closed so tightly that the line between lid and body was scarcely perceptible. Three perpendicular parallel slits formed the keyholes. Behind them ran a band of bright steel. The thing had been specially made to be opened only by diabolically contrived keys. And the keys lay in the strong room of a bank to which he, as Atherton Drake, could have no access.

He took the accursed box into his bedroom where he employed all the toilet instruments which he could find, including a manicure set, in a vain endeavour to force the locks. He broke knives and scissors and twisted buttonhooks. The keyholes seemed to be only camouflaged parts of a solid steel mass. He carried the box back to the library where Tonio, who worked in the back room planned originally as the husband's study, joined him smilingly with a handful of documents for his signature.

"I've lost the keys of this infernal box," he said. "If you can open it I'll really call you a conjurer."

Tonio laughed. It wasn't a conjurer but an expert safe-crook who was needed.

"Do you think I can cable the governor of Sing-Sing to send me one, all expenses paid?" said Buddy.

Tonio thought this very humorous.

"You might try," he said.

Buddy thought he had better first try Bronson.

"Bronson," he said, "I've lost the keys of this box. Do you remember the firm"—he snapped his fingers in vain summons of memory—"who supplied it some years ago?"

"I don't, Sir Atherton. Except for the last few days lying there, I've never set eyes on it before."

He dismissed Bronson, forlorn hope, broken reed—what you will. Whence had Atherton procured this infernal contraption?

Buddy, the last person on earth to give way to attack of nerves, broke down; almost wept before the silly, baffling steel box. At last he damned it in a futile way and taking, as usual, the line of least resistance, set it back on the lowest shelf of the bookcase.

The Park Lane flat became a horrible prison. Madness would grip him before he could sail in the "Carisbrooke Castle." There was nothing to do during the leaden and laggard hours. For occupation sake he said one day to Tonio:

"Teach me some of your old conjuring tricks. It's something to do, anyway."

So Tonio, whose secretarial activities were not overstrained, began to initiate him into the mystery of the magician's craft.

"But you have the hands, my dear Buddy," he cried one day, "the flexible conjurer's hands and long fingers. You ought to be able to do anything. It's only practice. Look. This card. I can't do it now for my hands are crippled. But with your wonderful hands I can make you pass it from back to front. Like this. See?" He showed him, manipulating his fingers. "Two hours a day—just these movements—and you soon will be perfect."

That was the beginning of Buddy's conjuring education.

One morning, having an appointment with a tailor in Maddox Street—he had ordered some thin clothes in view of the South African summer—the pale, wintry sun and dry pavements tempted him to walk. He proceeded down Park Lane, turning into Upper Brook Street. As he was passing Claridge's an elderly, beaming ecclesiastic in stringed hat and gaiters met him with outstretched hands.

"My dear Drake! How are you?"

"Just so so," said Buddy, returning the fervid clasp.

The bishop—for bishop it was—laughed genially.

"I've never seen you looking so well. Why weren't you at the meeting last night?"

"What meeting?"

"Why, the Hellenic of course. I came up especially for it. We all expected to find you there."

"I'm not so well as I look," said Buddy, "and unfortunately I'm not allowed to go out at night."

"That's a pity. You would have enjoyed it. Passereau came from Paris to give us his new light on Plotinus—always a baffling fellow. It's more or less your subject—the Neo-Platonists. A most interesting evening."

Buddy sighed. "I'm cut off from so much nowadays."

"We must get Passereau to send you a copy of his paper—it'll be published in the 'Transactions' of the Society—and you must write a critical appreciation. Well, good-bye, my dear Drake."

"Good-bye, my dear fellow," said Buddy.

The genial bishop passed on his way. Buddy crossed Bond Street, thankful to be divided from his unknown acquaintance by the flood of traffic. In spite of the cold of the winter day he raised his hat and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

In these super-civilized thoroughfares of the West End of London lurked untold and horrible dangers. The attack of a wild bishop bludgeoning him with Greek scholarship might be followed by the onslaught of an aristocratic woman in furs, by a deadly politician shaking a skinny finger in his face.

He reached Maddox Street in safety, and after the fitting of his clothes took a taxi home.

"The Union Castle Line on the phone, Sir Atherton. Want to know whether you're taking up the pencilled accommodation on the 'Carisbrooke Castle'."

It was Bronson.

"Why on earth didn't you tell them I'm out? Say I'm out of town. Ask them to write."

Bronson came back with a message. Of course the Company would write, but the matter was urgent. In the meanwhile, if he could get into touch with his master, he was to report that the Company would do their best to reserve the accommodation for so illustrious a person as Sir Atherton Drake—so at least did Buddy gather—but that even the convenience of illustrious persons must be sacrificed sometimes to commercial considerations.

"I'll think it over," said Buddy.

But the more Buddy thought it over, the less possible seemed his escape from the notorious personality of Sir Atherton Drake. Sir Atherton Drake was an ex-Minister—although not a very important one—of the Crown. He had an uncontested position in the academic world. On board ship he must play the part of a reserved lion who permitted only the aristocrats of the social jungle to make a pet of him. In South Africa itself there would be Royal Governors-General, heads of universities, millionaires, all desiring to do honour to the eminent Sir Atherton Drake.

Buddy stood frozen before the prospect for the first time realized. The execution of so gigantic an imposture was not only beyond his wit but also revolting to his moral sense. It was one thing, he repeated to himself, to dispossess an unformed idiot Academy and an already opulent political party of a fortune—that crime sat lightly on his conscience—but it was quite a different thing to accept honour and hospitality, both private and public, under false pretences. As

Sir Atherton Drake he couldn't possibly visit South Africa. By the same process of reasoning all British Dominions were closed to him—Australia, Canada, New Zealand—the Indian Empire.

Where in the world should he betake himself in his Athertonian plumes?

"Tonio," he said, after having instructed the little man to cancel the South African bookings, "I've discovered that this planet is far too small for the comfort of a reasonable man. Let us take tickets to Mars."

Tonio scratched his cropped white head uncomprehendingly.

"What is it that you're afraid of? You have a title. You have a fortune. You have a beautiful country-house. You have this beautiful apartment. You have automobiles, servants, all that one could desire for happiness—and yet you're unhappy."

Buddy, sitting back in an armchair, his hands up to his temples, regarded him haggardly.

"Who's happy in this bloody world? Are you?"

"I am grateful, at least," said Tonio, "for all the mercies that God bestows on me."

Buddy replied with a short laugh:

"You'd better teach me how to get religion, and then we'll both become monks."

"For myself," said Tonio gravely, "I have already thought of it."

Buddy jumped up. "No, old man. No. Whatever one may think of God and religion and that sort of thing—I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world—yet I can't imagine God being pleased with you for scuttling away from the battle of life and skulking in a monastery. Of course, if you feel the spiritual vocation, that's another matter. But out of sheer funk, no!"

Tonio smiled, and his face was lit with a pathetic beauty.

"That I have told myself. I shall fight until I feel the spiritual vocation."

"We'll fight together," said Buddy.

"If we are to do that," said Tonio softly, "why not tell me what's troubling you?"

Buddy turned away. "I can't, old man, not yet. I wish I could. I will some day."

"You are afraid," said Tonio.

"Perhaps."

"Of me?"

"Of you and me. Of things—I can't explain. Of things between us that I should hate to lose. If I lost them I'd be the God-damnedest, lonesomest man on earth."

Tonio put out his crippled hands in a vague gesture.

"Without you, Buddy, I should be the same. Tell me what you want in your own good time. There is one thing—one last thing to which every man has a right, that is his alone, and that is the key to his own soul. Unless," he added after a pause, "he belongs to my faith. Then he must give it only to a priest in the confessional."

There was a long silence. Buddy walked about the room, threw some coals on the fire.

"When did you learn all this, Tonio?" he asked.

Tonio smiled and lit a cigarette.

"If a professional conjurer doesn't make a study of human nature he will be a very bad conjurer. See here," he said sharply, "why don't you open that—a despatch-box?"

"What?" said Buddy.

"That box." He corrected instinctively the curious Italo-American liaison between harsh consonants which had lingered for a lifetime in his speech. "You're afraid, Buddy."

"I'm not." He drew himself up indignantly.

"But without a key how am I to open the damned thing?"

"All manufacturers of safes and such things have experts who can open anything. You talked about crooks. That was foolish."

"Well, go and get me an expert," said Buddy.

"He shall be here to-morrow," said Tonio.

"There you are, sir," said the expert the next day, throwing open the mutilated lid of the box.

He retired, followed by Tonio. Buddy was left alone to grapple with his mystery. But the more he grappled with it the less soluble did it become. The contents of the box consisted only of masses of documents, some pinned together, some folded and docketed by means of strange signs, some loose. Some in manuscript, some in typescript. But not a scrap of paper, as he feverishly examined the mass, bore any other symbol than the baffling fractional cipher in which the recent letter was couched. He scanned page after page in the vain hope of obtaining a clue. On obvious letters there was never a printed letter-heading. Addresses and dates and signatures, in the usual places, were in the cipher. They bore no customary beginnings or endings of courtesy; nothing corresponded to "Dear Sir" or "Yours faithfully" from which, perhaps, he might have found something to work upon.

He was not a step nearer the secret of the Lothbury banking account. He was helpless. Anyone could call in an expert to break open a box or safe of which the keys were lost without exciting suspicion. But in his isolation and ignorance he dare not call in an expert to decipher these strange, jealously guarded documents.

When Tonio came into the room, Buddy closed the lid.

"I've found what I wanted," he said casually.

"I'm very glad," said Tonio.

"Let's get on with our conjuring," said Buddy. "What about sending out for some rabbits and a bowl of gold-fish?"

"All in good time," smiled Tonio.

Two nights after this—whithersoever he might go he must wait for the new suits he had ordered from the Maddox Street tailor—Buddy went out for the walk that had grown habitual. He must take exercise or he would grow heavy and liverish and a curse unto himself. And he must walk fast for a couple of hours—no matter where. If in a definite circuit, so much the better; if straight ahead, through Hammersmith or Putney, or, the other way, along Oxford Street, Holborn, the City, he could always, when tired, find a taxi to take him home. He went alone. In the night thoroughfares of London, with their myriad mysteries of loneliness, a man on foot is his own best companion. It was the only period of his working day when Buddy felt free; when he could be Buddy Drake once more; when he could stand by a coffee-stall and talk, unknown human unit, to other human units equally obscure. A tactfully expended shilling or two could gain him queerly sympathetic human intercourse. His vagrant footsteps had led him to other strange places unfrequented by Sir Atherton Drake. He had strayed into the Hammersmith Palais de Danse and had purchased the fleeting Terpsichorean companionship of a Miss Mullens, an exquisite, fair-haired creature of Robot inaccessibility. It was very cold. He didn't dance the new steps? Oh, he had been living in America? That was a long way off. He vaguely gathered from her perfunctory and precise verbiage that his new steps must have changed *diablement en route.*

He had even found himself hungrily eating fried fish and chips in Shoreditch.

On this particular night he wandered out, about ten o'clock, with no defined notion of direction, and had marched some twenty yards down Park Lane when a touch on his shoulder caused him to start and halt fiercely on the defensive.

"Sir Atherton——"

"Oh, go to hell!" cried Buddy, swinging an arm.

The man confronted him. In the dim light Buddy became aware of a man of some distinction. He wore a silk hat. The loose silk muffler round his neck disclosed the white tie of evening-dress. The sharp, thin face, clean-shaven except for a clipped, grizzled moustache, seemed to be that of one of his own class.

"I'm sorry, my friend, to have startled you, knowing that you are an invalid. But I have no choice."

Buddy noted that he spoke careful English, with a curious foreign accent.

"That's all right," said Buddy. "What do you want?"

"Some talk with you, obviously. I don't wait outside your door, waiting for you to come out, for nothing."

"As you know my door, why the devil didn't you come up and find out whether I could see you?"

"I don't understand——" said the man.

"Neither do I," said Buddy.

"That is surprising. Let us walk a little. It is too cold to stand still."

Buddy mechanically strolled down Park Lane by his side.

"Why haven't you answered my two letters?"

"What letters?"

"The first, the foolish one. The second, in cipher, very serious."

"What was in them?" asked Buddy. "I've been ill, as you seem to know, and I've not been able to worry with my correspondence."

The man slackened his steps and touched Buddy on the arm.

"This is not like you, Atherton. *Quelle mouche vous a piqué?*"

"What?" asked Buddy, not catching the French.

"What fly has bitten you? What is the matter? Payments are overdue. Never before has it happened. I write you two letters which you perfectly understand. Still no answer. You ask me why I should not visit you in your apartment. You stagger me with the question. I learn that you're in Paris. I also learn that you're back in London. You've contracted new and extraordinary habits. For the last few nights you go out regularly about ten o'clock. I wait to-night and I meet you. As you say in English —what's it all about?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," replied Buddy coolly. "It's up to you, I should think, to tell me."

"I have already told you. The payments are overdue!"

Buddy began to glow in the light of one of his lunatic inspirations.

"What payments, my dear friend?" he asked blandly.

"What payments! You're talking nonsense."

"Or are you talking blackmail?"

Again he halted beneath a street lamp and scanned, as well as he could, the features of his companion. The eyes of the latter flashed angrily.

"That's an imbecile word to use after all these years of honourable association. You must be going mad!"

"No," said Buddy with a little thrill of enjoyment.

Life had been very dull of late. "By no means. I'm talking sanity. Why should I pay you a lot of money? It seems you want a lot. I don't even know how much. What have you done to deserve it?"

The other raised his arms in a foreign shrug.

"Really you are taking leave of your senses!"

"But do tell me why, my dear friend," said Buddy, in his kindest tone.

"It stands to reason. It has always stood to reason," said the flabbergasted man. "Until this moment there has never been any question."

"Of what?" asked Buddy.

"Of what—Good God!"

"Don't throw your arms about like that. There's a policeman coming. He'll tell us to move on, or take us up for drunks. Just be quiet for a minute and explain things. You apologized for startling a sick man. And"—he tapped his forehead—"my memory's going. I ought to apologize. Perhaps you're right. I'm not quite the man I was." He assumed a puzzled, baffled expression. "Give me a friendly lead. Of course I know you, dear old friend. But your name?"

He snapped his fingers. The other snapped his lips.

"Andrea Chrysolos."

Buddy clapped him on the shoulder. "Let's get on." He linked his arm under that of his friend. "Now it all comes back to me. You've been writing to me. The cipher—you mentioned the cipher."

"Naturally, the cipher."

Buddy's heart leaped within him. Here was adventure. Wild adventure. The cipher! Something to set a man's brain afire with lambent clarity. Buddy had the sensation of being not a human being but a perambulating intellect. He was on the thresh-

old of an amazing discovery. Could he, by exercise of mother wit, mystify this Greek, Andrea Chrysolos—his mind registered the name for all time—into revelation of Atherton's mystery? The cipher!

He clung to the man's arm affectionately.

"Let us go somewhere, where we can have a heart to heart talk. Not *chez-moi* for obvious reasons." The hint had been given before by Chrysolos. "Where? I tell you what—— Are you known at the Grosvenor Hotel?"

"No," replied the man impatiently.

"Neither am I."

It was true. Tonio had a room there and he had once called for him in his car, but he had walked in and out, an unrecorded impersonality. It could not possibly be a haunt of Atherton's. He hailed a taxi.

"I hate conversing in an upright position," he said as they turned into Piccadilly. "Standing on one's feet one can address multitudes. But gossip with a friend—that's different. Have a cigarette? Besides," he went on, "I assume you want to have a very serious conversation with me. Dear, dear, how long is it since we've met?"

"Four years," replied Chrysolos.

"How time flies," said Buddy. "Who would have thought it!"

Chrysolos, apparently in no mood to toy with philosophical platitudes, made no reply, and they exchanged no further words until the taxi, after its swift course down Grosvenor Place, drew up at the Grosvenor Hotel.

At the far end of the main hall was a broad flight of steps leading to a quiet and comfortable lounge whose windows, discreetly curtained by night, look on the busy platforms of the Brighton branch of the station. Save for a female voyager with a knitted shawl round

her shoulders, writing at the far end of the room, away from the fireplace where a bright fire was burning —there still lingers a type of voyaging English spinster who thinks it's weak or unhygienic or immoral to sit near a fire—the place at that time of night was deserted. Buddy drew two chairs to a table by the mantelpiece.

"Let us be comfortable, at any rate." He rang a bell. A waiter appeared.

"What'll you have?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, come. I'm having a whisky and soda. You must."

The Greek shrugged and conceded shortly.

"A small Evian."

Buddy concluded that the man lacked a sense of joviality.

"Another cigarette."

This was accepted. They settled down to their talk.

"Now," said Buddy, preparing to enjoy himself, as he had done years ago when entrusted with the dangerous task of setting traps for Germans, "let us have it out together. How far had we got in our conversation?"

"We had got nowhere," replied Chrysolos morosely. "And I don't see why we should try to get anywhere. There is no going back or going forward. The position is eternally the same. That you don't appear to realize it is to me a bewildering act of unreason."

Buddy leaned back in his chair and passed a languid hand over his eyes.

"I've been ill, as I've told you. Very ill. I can't remember even the commonest things. You say you've written to me. What did you say?"

"I reminded you of the payments."

"Oh, yes," said Buddy, striving to look at him

in a hollow-eyed manner. "And I suppose you threatened——?"

"Suppose I did, if you like, Sir Atherton Drake," said the other cuttingly. "Haven't I the right to do so? Have I not always acted honourably towards you—as you to me? You say you've lost your memory. That may be fine for you. But, as you say in this country, where do I come in? We were partners. You had the lion's share. That was natural. It was yours by right. But the poor jackal"—he made an angry gesture with his fist—"has his rights too. And he must claim them. It's obvious."

"It is, my dear fellow," said Buddy wearily. "But let us theorize for a while. Let us put a—what you call it?—hypothetical case. Suppose I'm sick of being a lion and have conceived a horrible loathing for jackals. What then?"

The other, possibly the most bewildered man on earth, leaned forward in his chair and almost whispered.

"You couldn't be so mad, Atherton."

"Why?" asked Buddy.

"But, good God Almighty, I've got all your reports. I only have to make a packet of them, with the key to the cipher, and send them anonymously to the Foreign Office or Scotland Yard. They would be read. Naturally, you would be"—he flickered expressive fingers—"done for. I would lose my income, the greater part of it. For, after all," he said with a flourish, "I have enough to keep me from starvation. But there would be no possible question of prosecution for blackmail. How could there be?"

"Quite so. Quite so," said Buddy reflectively, and taking a sip of his drink. "You must forgive me. I've been going through such a bad time. And of

course there was no one to whom I could refer. I have had nobody in my confidence."

"I should hope not!" said Chrysolos.

"Well, that's that," said Buddy. "You see my position. I've been very ill. Despaired of. Really. But, as I said, it's all getting clear now. But there are one or two things that worry me. Supposing I were to die. What would happen to your income?"

The most bewildered man in the world said huskily:

"But, my good Atherton, can you sit here and tell me that you haven't read my last two or three letters?"

"I haven't," said Buddy blankly. "I couldn't."

"Why?"

"Because," said Buddy, putting a despairing hand to his brow, "I have lost—forgotten—the key to the cipher. I've nearly gone out of my mind over it. How could I tell my doctors?" Buddy discomposed his features into haggardness. "It's something so simple, after all."

The other bent forward and tapped his knee, and regarded him with an air of concern.

"I knew—I have my means of knowing that you were a sick man—in danger from your heart. But I never thought you were as ill as that. The cipher. The Paternoster."

The dawn of a smile illuminated Buddy's face. He raised a hand.

"Yes, yes. How does it go on?"

The Greek, humouring him, kindly said:

"*Pater noster qui es in cœlis* . . . The letter 'e' either fourth letter of first word or"—he counted on his fingers—"fifth letter of second word . . . et cetera . . . either numerator 4 and denominator 1, or numerator 5 and denominator 2 . . . and so on with its infinite combinations."

Buddy smiled a seraphic smile and covered his eyes with the balls of his thumbs.

"Good God! Of course!" He swept his hands away. "What an unexplored mystery the human brain is. I knew all the time that it wasn't one of those silly ciphers that must have a written key. I knew it depended on something that people carried in their head. During my illness something hammered in my brain. Greek. Greek. Greek. You see the association, don't you? Whereas, of course, it's the Latin Paternoster. Everything's as clear as mud now, my dear fellow."

He rose and Chrysolos rose too.

"Quite sure you won't have a drink?"

"No thank you, Atherton."

"Well, everything will be all right now." Buddy patted him on the shoulder.

They descended the broad stairs together, crossed the hall. Buddy signalled the doorkeeper for a taxi. He wrung the Greek's hand.

"Good-bye, my dear friend. I've had a most delightful evening. I haven't the faintest idea who you are"—he held his hand in a tight grip—"or who you think I am."

The man gasped. "Atherton Drake."

"Never heard of him," said Buddy cheerfully, throwing himself up in all his brawn and newly acquired flesh, and assuming his most un-Athertonian grin. "Atherton who? My name's Bendyke, Cyrus Bendyke, an American actor." He gave a touch of American accent. "It's been perfectly fine meeting you, but I don't know what the hell you've been talking about."

Chrysolos, still in Buddy's grip, continued to gasp.

"You're not Atherton Drake? No, you're not." He looked at him open-mouthed, and eyes staring.

"Of course you're not. You're his double." He wrenched his hand away. "But how come you to live in Park Lane Mansions?"

"I don't live there," said Buddy. "Go there sometimes to see a sister of mine who has married an Englishman."

The sallow, aristocratic Chrysolos, his overcoat thrown back, and showing white waistcoat and white tie of evening dress, stood quivering with anger.

"You've made a fool of me, sir."

"Why not?" smiled Buddy. "You put yourself into my hands, and begged me to play with you."

The doorkeeper touched his cap.

"Taxi, sir."

Buddy accompanied the outraged man a step or two.

"Bendyke's my name. Cyrus Bendyke."

The Greek made a furious gesture and disappeared through the swing doors.

Buddy returned to the entresol lounge and ordered another whisky and soda.

"Now I've got to do some thinking," he said.

CHAPTER XIII

AS the result of much thinking Buddy found himself the next evening at the Prince of Wales's Hotel, Southport, Lancs, with a resigned Tonio in attendance, and the steel despatch-case, a Latin Testament, a Latin dictionary, and a typewriter as important articles of travel. The books were easily discoverable on the library shelves. The preliminaries of the journey were fraught with irritating difficulties.

The web of thirty years' growth that had enmeshed his trivial private life—or rather the life of Atherton—with Bronson's, had to be tactfully broken. Bronson expected to know where he was going, to take tickets, accompany him to the station, wire ahead for hotel accommodation, to follow the immutable routine of the perfect manservant's life. Buddy's mastering idea was to escape from Bronson, to disappear for a time, at any rate, from Bronson's ken, so that he should not be disturbed by the dreadful Greek, Andrea Chrysolos. He was aware also that Bronson's nerves had been giving way under the strain of continuous mendacity. Selous, friend and physician, had tried Bronson almost to breaking-point. To subject Bronson to sudden shock would be unwise.

The other was Westover, the chauffeur, intolerable though unsuspicious spy on his actions. As a man of dignity he found it impossible to ignore his faithful servitors. It seemed easy enough to bid Bronson

pack, say a fortnight's necessaries, call a taxi, and drive whithersoever he cared, with no regard for anybody. But Bronson and Westover would surely meet and shake their heads and discuss their master's unprecedented behaviour, which had been eccentric enough already.

Wherefore Buddy, after a careful examination of railway time-tables, informed Bronson that Professor Gaffarelli and himself were going to the mild climate of Torquay to work at a new book—Bronson was very proud of Atherton's books—but whether he would stay with Lord Ellerby, the famous scholar, or at the Imperial Hotel he couldn't know until Lord Ellerby met him at the station. A wire would inform Bronson. Bronson, zealous and happy, made all arrangements. Westover drove his master to Waterloo. A porter took charge of the luggage. Buddy, with a few hours to spare, had the luggage put in the cloak-room, and laughed the happy laugh of the free man. He crossed the bridge, walked along the Embankment—it was a morning of pale sunshine and east wind which Buddy found exhilarating—paused to look through the railings at the grey enchantment of the Temple, went on, entered the City and had an early and joyous luncheon of oysters, steak and stout.

Retrieving his luggage at Waterloo, he joined Tonio at Euston and was carried, a lost baronet, to Southport. At the hotel he sank his baronetcy, registering as "A. Drake"—the letters "A.D." being boldly printed on his suit-cases.

When they were shown into their comfortable sitting-room—which Tonio had been secretly instructed to order—Buddy flung out his hands.

"Thank God we're out of prison!"

Tonio said humbly:

"To me one place is very like another. But could

you tell me why we have come to this strange, far-away town?"

"It's a million to one chance of anybody knowing me here. It's the home of rich Manchester and Liverpool business men among whom I don't think I have a single acquaintance. I've also heard it has more sun in winter than any other spot in England."

After dinner Buddy put the mangled steel despatch-box on the table, and drew from it the Latin Testament and dictionary and the cipher letter which he had received from Chrysolos. Also a pad of manuscript paper, a fountain-pen and a pencil. Tonio, the type-writer in front of him, sat opposite with the patience of a man whom no eccentricity on the part of his employer could surprise.

Buddy had a confused memory that the Lord's Prayer occurred somewhere at the end of the fifth chapter of St. Matthew. He found it in the sixth.

"I want you to copy that out."

Tonio looked at it and shrugged. "That is the Paternoster. Why, I know it by heart."

"It's the spelling that's important," said Buddy. "Leave an inch space between each line."

Whereupon Tonio began to type, and Buddy watched the crippled yet deft fingers working out the first steps to a great discovery.

He had not slept since he had crawled into the Mansions the night before, having arrived there by long and devious routes so as to throw Chrysolos, possible spy and tracker, off the scent. He had at once searched the bookshelves for some volume that would give him the text of the Paternoster, but after half an hour he grew tired. So many of the shelves were in gloom. He had postponed the search till the morning light, and meanwhile he had to continue to think—to make plans for the further outwitting of

Chrysolos, who apparently held Atherton at his mercy. In the morning, there was the Latin Testament staring at him from the top shelf. But time was precious. Many things must be done before starting for the Torquay train: instructions to Tonio; bamboozling of servants; obtaining a large sum of ready money from the bank. He had deliberately to put off testing the cipher till they arrived at their secure destination. But all the day curious anxiety had gnawed him, and now, as he watched Tonio's fingers, the anxiety became a torment.

Tonio handed him the typescript sheet. With fingers that shook he pencilled what he remembered of Chrysolos's rapid explanation. This was the result:

12345	123456	123	12	12	123456	123456789	10	11	12	13
Pater	noster	qui	es	in	coelis	sanctific	e	t	u	r
1	2	3	4	5	6	7				

12 345	1234	12345678	123456	1234	1234	12345678
nomen	tuum	adveniat	regnum	tuum	fiat	voluntas
8	9	10	11	12	13	14

123	12345	12	12345	12	12	12345	12345	1234567
tua	sicut	in	coelo	et	in	terra	Panem	nostrum
15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23

123456789	10	11	12	12345	12345	12	1234567	12345
quotidian	u	m	da	nobis	hodie	et	dimitte	nobis
24			25	26	27	28	29	30

123456	123456	12345	12	123	123456789	10
debita	nostra	sicut	et	nos	dimittimu	s
31	32	33	34	35	36	

123456789	10	11	1234567	12	12	123	1234567	12
debitorib	u	s	nostris	et	ne	nos	inducas	in
37			38	39	40	41	42	43

123456789	10	11	123	123456	123	1	1234	1234
tentation	e	m	sed	libera	nos	a	malo	Amen
44			45	46	47	48	49	50

There was the key to the cipher, one to be preserved only in the memory of men, its preservation in written code being obviously imbecile; defying the cipher experts of the world. They might guess that it depended on a text. But there were myriads of texts familiar to man's memory: "Mary had a little lamb . . .", "Allons, enfants de la patrie . . ." Nay, any conceivable set of words that could be memorized by the users of the code. It was expert proof. The letter "t", for instance. It could be $\frac{3}{1}$ or $\frac{1}{12}$ or $\frac{4}{24}$ or $\frac{5}{31}$ . . . and so on with other letters. Simplicity itself.

He regarded the page fascinated. There were just fifty words. The idea struck him that the choice of text was a scholar's cunning. He looked for letters. From the English alphabet the only missing ones were J.K.W.X.Y.Z. He had enough common sense to know that they would have got over the difficulty somehow. His school memories suggested that in Latin "J" and "I" were interchangeable; that "C" is always hard and might take the place of "K" at a pinch; that "W" might easily be represented by a double "U." The letter "Y"—funny it should not appear in the Paternoster. The things hammered into his careless brain at Eton reappeared through the palimpsest of overlying memories. The letter "Y" was only used in transliteration from the Greek—chiefly in proper names. . . .

He caught sight of himself, a grubby, chubby boy in a big collar, sitting in a form-room among twenty or thirty of his disgusted peers, half listening, one June day—the lovely sunlight streaming through old windows—to a perfectly futile Ass in gown and white tie telling them that *lachrima* could be spelt with a "y" or an "i." There was a lazy fly crawling up his desk. He bet with himself that the fly wouldn't crawl

up to the edge. He held his breath. He lost. He turned his attention to the Ass. The Ass's name was John Young. He slipped his neighbour a scribbled slip: "Iohn Ioung." The Ass's hawk eye had seen the passing and had called for the paper. . . . "You'll do me 500 lines: *sunt lachrimæ rerum.* It may teach you scholarship, philosophy, and perhaps the avoidance of personal flippancy." The unmitigated Ass! How he loathed him. And yet now—the Ass suddenly came in useful. And yet again—why had he forgotten?—on practically his last day at Eton the Ass had come up to him, swaggering youngster, jauntily bearing the burden of athletic honours, yet, in his boyish heart, not far from tears at the thought of leaving, and put his hand on his shoulder and said: "Look here, old chap, if there's anything I can ever possibly do for you, do let me know." And the Ass got himself gallantly killed in the War. *Sunt lachrimæ rerum!* My God! "Y" or "I," what did it matter? The eyes of Buddy, for the moment forgetful of cipher, were blurred with the tears of human things.

Buddy looked over at Tonio and bade him make another copy. And while Tonio obediently clicked, he prepared to decipher the last letter of Chrysolos.

The text started:

$$\frac{6}{10}\ \frac{7}{87}\ \frac{3}{91}\ \frac{3}{24}\ \frac{2}{26}\ \frac{2}{13}\ \frac{4}{6}\ \frac{1}{946}\ \frac{6}{10}$$

He looked. Sixth letter of tenth word was "I." The seventh letter of the eighty-seventh word . . .? But there were only fifty words in the Paternoster. There was a catch somewhere. The seventh letter of the eighth word? But there were only five letters in the eighth word "*nomen.*" But the seventh letter of the seventh word was "f." The first two fractions therefore gave him the very sound word "if." And so,

carrying on experimentally, he found, with no great exercise of intelligence, that as the denominator represented the numerical place of the word, and as the number of words were only fifty, any initial six, seven, eight or nine, unless a solitary digit, could be disregarded—a grace note, as it were, flung in to make the thing more difficult—and that attention must be paid to the second digit. The same reasoning applied to superfluous digits in the numerators. The fraction $\frac{29}{13}$ could in itself represent nothing, as there was no word with twenty-nine letters. But $\frac{2}{13}$ was again the letter "i."

Thus, in unaccustomed concentration of brain, he worked out the sequence of letters which he pencilled in capitals:

IFTOOIL

"Good God, Tonio!" he cried, in excitement. "I've got it. Take this down: 'If too ill.'"

And so in great excitement he deciphered the whole letter.

"If too ill to attend to payments I must insist on alternative already discussed, namely the payment of capital sum of twenty thousand pounds before the end of the year. Indeed, in view of your precarious health this seems the only reasonable solution. You must transfer me amount in bearer bonds for obvious reasons. We have relied on each other's honour in the past. You can rely on mine in the future if you accede. But if you play false I must reluctantly use my weapon. I have earned my share. A. C."

But where A. C.—obviously Andrea Chrysolos—lived, the letter heading gave no indication. There

was only the date. And the letter contained no reference to the mysterious Lothbury banking account or to the name under which Atherton held that account in order to supply Mr. Andrea Chrysolos with his secret subsidy.

Tonio, after taking down the letter word by word dictated from Buddy's pencil deciphering, read it aloud and passed the typescript across the table.

"That is blackmail, Buddy," said he.

"Unashamed," said Buddy.

"But why does he—A. C.—think that you are going to die?"

"I nearly died once in Chicago, didn't I? And if it hadn't been for you I shouldn't be alive now."

Tonio sighed. "You were so simple then. You are complicated now."

"All this"—he waved towards the box—"is my heritage. My heritage from my brother, my twin brother. Once I was just Buddy Drake, the bum actor. Now I am Sir Atherton Drake, the title is hereditary—collateral, next-of-kin anyway—and all the damned papers are my late brother's. That's why I was so anxious to break open the despatch-box."

"But why—tell me, for I can't understand," said Tonio in his quiet, puzzled way. "Why did the letter come addressed to you, Sir Atherton Drake?"

"That's the name I go by."

"But it was meant for the man who is being blackmailed."

"Naturally. I'm being blackmailed—on my brother's account. Can't you see?" said Buddy rather sharply. "Let us get on with it."

Tonio, with a duplicate key to the cipher and Buddy's supplementary explanations, set to work on a typescript which Buddy had drawn haphazard from the box. Buddy set to work on another. Decoding to

the non-expert is a tedious business, especially when there are no spaces between words. It was only after much puzzling that they discovered that a zero in the numerator of a fraction corresponded with the word " stop " in a telegram.

" I can make no sense," said Tonio, after a long and concentrated struggle.

" Neither can I," said Buddy, looking up over the typewriter, across the table. " As far as I can make out, it's in Latin."

" Mine isn't," said Tonio. " I know a few Latin words. I sang in the choir when I was a boy in a little church down by Hoboken."

" Let's look at it."

Tonio passed the painfully decoded array of pencilled capital letters across to Buddy, who stared at it until his eyes grew blinded, and his head reeled. There could be nothing wrong with the cipher. The decoding of the letter had been a matter of comparative simplicity. It could only be a question of language. Then, after much staring, there appeared an assemblage of letters : NICHT and further on another WIEVIEL.

" Good God ! " cried Buddy. " It's in German, and I don't know more than a dozen words in the beastly language. Do you ? "

" How should I know German ? " asked Tonio.

" And this," said Buddy, trying his hand on his own typescript, " is in Latin, and all I've remembered about Latin is—well, it has gone into the dust of the stars."

Tonio pricked up his ears.

" You say ? What you say ? "

Buddy, Britannically self-conscious, grew confused and replied :

" All gone into star-dust."

" That's very beautiful," said Tonio.

"Just came into my head," said Buddy. "We must try something else."

By four o'clock in the morning they had deciphered or rather had turned pages and pages of fractions into a welter of alphabetical letters which, from here and there a gleam of a known world such as "*nicht*" or "*sunt*," proclaimed themselves to be records either in German or Latin. They tried sheet after sheet, selected haphazard, of the pinned-together typescript and manuscript. In never a one did they find a trace of the English language.

They were tired out. Further effort seemed hopeless. They went to bed.

The next morning before lunch they strolled down Lord Street, Southport's thoroughfare of pride, the spacious boulevard of gay shops. It was a brisk sunny day. The pavements were crowded with a multitude of pretty women, their bright fresh faces issuing from collars of furs. A row of shiny cars lined the kerb. Little groups—two or three at a time—of women stood and prattled for a moment and vanished into the shops on errands of housewifery or vanity. The poulterer's, spotless, enticing, a kind of heaven for all kinds of clean and plump birds of paradise—fowls, turkeys, pheasants, woodcock, snipe—was as much thronged with the fur-clad, scented and kindly-faced women as the draper's next door. Women, happy, well-clad women; women bent on women's happy and serious duties. That was Buddy's sensitive impression. But where were the men? Here and there, of course, an elderly fellow, fur-coated and gloved, pursued down Lord Street the even tenor of his daily way. There were brisk young fellows, too, who threaded their way along the pavement, obviously on business bent. But they were not, as Buddy

rightly surmised, the partners or associates of the gentle throng in the shops. They belonged to a lower social stratum.

It took him a day or two—after cheerful converse with the manager of the hotel, and wandering through the mazes of residential roads—to realize the unique character of this sun-filled, gay northern town. It has no industries. It makes nothing, and is proud of it. As a seaside town it is further from a fathom of sea water than any coast town in the world. Silly summer visitors if they want to bathe must do so in an artificial tank surrounded by scenic railways and water-chutes and other traps for the many-headed. But Southport regards summer tourists as either non-existent, or as a plague of flies. Southport is self-contained. Taking it house by house, it contributes far more to the Exchequer by way of income-tax than any town of its population in the United Kingdom. And why?

Every house in Southport disgorges every morning a prosperous looking man who takes train to Liverpool or Manchester, and every house, between the hours of five and seven in the afternoon, receives him after his day's money-making toil. The men depart in thousands in the morning leaving the womenfolk; and in thousands in the evening to rejoin their women-folk do they return. It is almost patriarchal in its stern sociological inevitableness. And the women must accept the inevitable. They do so gaily, playing their dignified parts in the butchers' and bakers' and fishmongers' shops in Lord Street.

"All this," said Buddy, explaining England to Tonio, "is damned interesting."

"But in America the wives of business men do just the same thing," said Tonio, not greatly impressed.

Buddy thought; threw his mind back to the rare

glimpses of sweet American life which had been allowed him in his foolish vagabondage.

"I suppose you're right, Tonio. The decent savage man goes out and gets food for his family. The decent savage woman stays at home and prepares the previous day's kill for the good chap to eat. We can't get away from the elemental. If you strip 'em naked and cover them with skin and beads, all these women are just squaws. But, Tonio," he clapped the little man on the shoulder, "look at the spirituality, the infinite web of intellectuality and emotionalism—God knows what—they've developed! That's what knocks me. Look at that woman. A goddess——"

She was, indeed, a stately Junoesque woman whom, idly, they had observed ordering cabbages or what not in a greengrocer's shop.

"Look at her. Doing squaw's work. And, I'd bet my life, all for the sake of a beefy son of a bitch of a husband who'd only use his tomahawk in the dark when no one was looking."

Tonio looked slyly up. "Since when have you become a feminist, Buddy?"

"Since I came into this beastly life," replied Buddy cryptically.

After lunch Tonio suggested a return to work over the typescript. But Buddy pleaded the need of relaxation. They must proceed with the daily practice in conjuring. He took a childish delight in these lessons. His fingers were apt, his mind was quick, and his patience as a learner equalled that of Tonio as a teacher. Already he could make the pass, the flicking of a card from front to back of the hand, the basis of all prestidigitation. He must do it, said his professor, until he didn't know that he was doing it, that being the only way for his audience not to know he was doing it. He could also produce wooden eggs

from his mouth and half-crowns from the air. Tonio also was initiating him into the secrets of mechanical magic dependent on trick appliances.

"We'll go over to Manchester to-morrow and get an outfit," said Buddy.

And that, for their absurd sojourn in Southport, was the simple history of their lives. They walked up and down Lord Street in the morning, sometimes strolling along the parade with its deserted array of chutes and railings and whirligig spirals that looked, in winter-time, like giant skeletons of things that in summer must be blooming in gay foliage. They found the cosy oyster-bar where the *cognoscenti* of Southport whet their appetites for luncheon on what the late George Augustus Sala—or his contemporary co-Daily Telegraphists, with their now despised but really immortal sense of word-values—called "succulent bivalves", and champagne of true vintage. In the afternoon they conjured. In the evenings they deciphered fractions into streams of alphabetical letters, unseparated words, unpunctuated sentences, which they knew were important documents couched in Latin or German, neither of which they could read.

Yet, by degrees, Buddy could space off here and there a few Latin words. A bright idea occurred to him. Manchester was a University town. The University could supply scholarship to anyone who needed it. He had but to get into touch with a young classical lecturer—the University would surely issue a Calendar, procurable in Manchester—who for a fee would undertake the task of further deciphering and translation. The same, too, with regard to the German. The University must be teeming with brainy linguists.

They went by the quick and comfortable train to Manchester. They found a shop where they could buy their elementary conjuring apparatus, and

an educational bookshop where they bought the annual publication of the Victoria University of Manchester. He had already settled upon two names—names of lecturers—he thought professors would be too high and mighty to bother with such trivial matters as translations, and had already drafted letters, which, in Tonio's typescript, lay before him for signature, when a word or two crystallized themselves out of a page of unintelligible letters.

He had dismissed Tonio for the night. He himself, tired and worried, was about to go to bed. But a still blazing fire and a remaining shot of whisky in the bottle had lured him to continued investigation.

In pencil he traced the recognizable words :

"*Dic instanter quant . . . vigint mil sat . . . exempl. fœderis. . . .*"

This, at any rate, was simple. The writer said : "Say instantly how much . . ."—the Latin was obviously abbreviated—"Twenty thousand pounds enough . . . copy of treaty."

Buddy's schoolboy Latin had faded from his mind. But *fœdus, fœderis*, a treaty, like *exercitus*, an army, or *tria millia passuum*, three thousand yards, must be imbedded in the memory of every man who, as a small boy, has been bored to drivelling imbecility by the dullest and least inspired book that generations of educational idiots have ever given a small boy to read—Cæsar's *De Bello Gallico*.

Fœderis? A copy of a Treaty would be a big order. But the word might equally mean an agreement. And he went on through the page and picked out *Italor* and *Ruman* . . . and *corpus exercit* . . . *num centum quat* . . . and a hundred other isolated and mutilated words which, set together even with dots between, conveyed to his brain a paralysing conviction of awful iniquity.

Twenty thousand pounds offered—almost obviously haggled over—for the betrayal of some Italian and Rumanian agreement entered into during the War.

With trembling fingers he tore into small pieces the two letters so light-heartedly dictated to Tonio. The secrets that these pages of unseparated alphabetical letters contained could not be entrusted to young men of the Victoria University of Manchester. They must lie for ever unrevealed to man. He took the clump of typescript, the result of a week's work, together with the two numbered Paternoster keys, into his bedroom and, a very frightened man, locked the door.

He had, as far as memory served, never locked his bedroom door during the course of his careless life. But here he was carrying with him a secret that, if known, as the blackmailer, Andrea Chrysolos, had hinted, to the Foreign Office or to Scotland Yard, would wither into dust all that remained of the eminent scholar, late Minister of the Crown, Sir Atherton Drake, Baronet.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER many days' poring over the complete transliteration of the cipher scripts, he could get very little further. Here and there he gathered from separable German words that " merken " —which he knew meant marks—played a great part in the correspondence. In the Latin there was indubitable reference to financial transactions, apparently on a great scale. But, although he worked himself into a state of moral and almost physical emaciation, he could find no real key to the mystery ; and Tonio, who was even less equipped than he in knowledge of the German and Latin tongues, was as useless as a sewing-maid set down to answer an examination paper in the Cambridge Mathematical Tripos. And never did either German or Latin give him the slightest clue to the address or real identity of Andrea Chrysolos, or to the name in which Atherton held his account at the bank in Lothbury, E.C.

But the more he pored, and the more emaciated did he become in his unprecedented intellectual efforts, the more did it become apparent to his essentially simple mind that here were hidden the secrets of a shameful and dishonourable drama. For there were dates of the War—and these were the most frequent ; dates immediately post-war ; only a few scraps bearing recent dates. Figures, he had discovered, had a little code of their own. The figure 1 was " a," 2 was " b," and so on for the ten digits. The " a," " b,"

etc., were in their turn treated according to the elastic fractional code.

It was all dark and horrible. Whether what he could surmise branded Atherton as an agent in the pay of a hostile power during the War, or as a cynical exploiter of the European general financial situation during or immediately after the Armistice, he could not accurately determine. At any rate, it was beyond human common sense to doubt that the sinister mass of documents, if reduced to cold English, would account for Atherton's astounding rise to fortune in so short a period. Equal to his own, Atherton's sole fortune had been twenty thousand pounds. He, Buddy, had squandered it like a fool. Atherton had guarded it like a prudent man. But how could one turn twenty thousand into two hundred thousand—to say nothing of the thousands that lay in the Lothbury Bank—without working for it? Salaries in minor political office could be disregarded. There were only two solutions to Atherton's sudden rise to fortune. One was a series of gambles in War industrial concerns. Fortunes had been made that way, in spite of the eighty per cent. excess profits tax. But Atherton, cold, calculating fish, was the last man to stake a shilling on any hazard. The other solution lay in these mystic sheets. And it was a story of cold and cynical dishonour. Perhaps of Treason—of High Treason. Sales of secret knowledge of things military, economic, financial—how could he tell?—to a foreign Government, with this eloquent and friendly Greek gentleman, Mr. Andrea Chrysolos, as go-between.

It was during these days that Buddy, for the sake of sanity, wore out the patient Tonio in lessons in prestidigitation.

Christmas came upon him before he realized it.

But what could Christmas matter? For years in his vagrant life it had only been a weary season of extra loneliness. He had come to hate its everywhere advertised assertion of festivity. Lord Street, Southport, seemed to go loathsomely mad. Its shops ran riot into fantastically unreal Christmas conviviality. He knew not which he detested most: the fat rosetted ox carcasses in the butchers' shops, the strings of geese and turkeys in the poulterers', the insane little figures of Father Christmas, white-bearded, cowled, rubicund, shamelessly Teutonic—if you turned them upside down you'd see "Made in Bavaria"—the vulgar mass upon mass of futile vanities in the vanity shop windows, the "Christmas gifts," "Christmas this . . ." "Christmas that . . .", the mechanical toys for children which any child, on its receipt from an uncle, would regard with a sickly smile of disappointed thanks, saying in its heart: "Of all the dam silly half-wits."

"This artificial family rejoicing," said Buddy, on one of these morning walks, "makes me sick. Even when I was a boy my mother took a malign pleasure in giving me things I wouldn't be seen dead with. She once gave me a tricycle, when already I was scooting about all over the place on the groom's bicycle. And then I remember a tie—a sort of 2nd Fishguard's tie, which I handed over to a girl in a confectioner's shop in Cambridge who didn't know how to break off an engagement with an impoverished young scholar of Magdalene. 'Give him this,' said I, 'and it'll do it.' And it did."

"You are talking, Buddy," said Tonio, "with the foolish bitterness of a lonely man. I am lonely but for you. I know I am foolish. But thank God I'm not bitter."

Buddy laughed. "You're a little plaster saint.

That's why I like you. If you've anything more to say, carry on."

"Why not take pleasure in looking at beauty?" said the little man, with a nod of his head towards a shop front stocked with leather and silver and gold and onyx and tortoise-shell and jade. "That dressing-case fitted with cut crystal and lapis lazuli. Why not let your eyes enjoy beautiful things!"

Buddy laughed again. Tonio was right. The dressing-case had its points. He paused and gave it more than a casual glance. For a thing of vanity, perhaps, from the masculine point of view, of sheer uselessness, it was also one of beauty. The glass receptacles were of cut crystal. The fittings—caps to bottles, backs to brushes and combs, handles to the various gadgets necessary for the trimming up of woman, were in lapis lazuli.

He was about to say jestingly to Tonio, "I wish I knew a woman I could give it to," when he suddenly remembered that there was a woman to whom he suddenly and madly desired to give it.

That afternoon in Paris when the barrier of Muriel had been temporarily overlooked, and they were talking in idle, friendly fashion of the Vanity of Human Wishes, or what not, Diana had said:

"There are many things I've wanted all my life which I shall never get. A villa in Cannes, a super Rolls-Royce with super chauffeur all my own, a thousand pound dressing-case . . ."

She had mentioned the super dressing-case as one of the unattainable things.

He entered the shop, followed by Tonio, and asked the price of the case in the window. It was a cheap thing, according to the salesman, belonging to a line of goods in great demand among the vulgar, costing just a few paltry hundred pounds. If he desired to

see something really important, he would show him the last word in dressing-cases, alone of its kind—not belonging to a line—which was really worth a connoisseur's consideration.

"But I want crystal and lapis," said Buddy.

"Quite," said the shopman. "That's what I want to show you."

He showed. Before the new Gorgeousness the shop window exhibit faded into a tawdry toilet set.

"I'll have it," said Buddy with a lordly air. "It must be sent off at once to London by special messenger."

He drew out a cheque-book.

"I'm afraid," ventured the salesman, "it will take a few days to pass the cheque through."

"It will take five minutes," said Buddy.

Tonio went out with the cheque on the Southport branch of the bank at which Hanover Square had established his credit, and returned with a bewildering mass of Bank of England notes.

Buddy gave the address of Miss Diana Merrow and, being assured that the special messenger would go up to London by the next train, went out of the shop. He had put nothing in the case that could indicate to Diana the source and origin of the gift. Tonio walked in silence by his side in the winter sunshine, along the car-lined pavement.

"What do you think of that, Tonio?" Buddy said at last.

"I think you must be in love with a woman," said Tonio.

Buddy clapped him on the shoulder.

"What a brain! Let us go and eat oysters and drink to her health."

Christmas came and went. The last days of the old year were petering slowly out; slowly because

Buddy was bored to infinite desolation. He had nothing to do; no companionship save that of Tonio. And Tonio was so patient, so indulgent, so obviously secure in the knowledge that he was suffering from some form of soul-sickness, that there were times when he would have liked to wring the neck of the faithful little man. Walks. Motor-trips to Liverpool, Manchester, Preston—great, whizzing, vitally important cities, but as far as joyous entertainment of the stranger within the gates is concerned, an abomination of drab desolation. Of course there is the proud boast, "What Manchester says to-day, London (or England is it? or the British Empire?) will say to-morrow." But to Buddy who didn't very much care what anybody said about anything—let alone saying it first—what did that pride of Manchester matter? No. The great, bright world of Manchester doesn't live in Manchester. It wouldn't see itself dead in Manchester. And the great bright world of Liverpool doesn't live in Liverpool. It wouldn't see itself dead in Liverpool. Just as the great bright world of London doesn't live in the City of London, and couldn't conceive itself being dead in the City. But there is the London of dreams; so is there the Paris, the Vienna of dreams. Perhaps Edinburgh and Dublin may have a touch of the glamour. But they are capital cities; and only in capital cities has the glamour its justification for the lost stranger. Buddy found little to do beyond prestidigitating all day long. Even Tonio found occupation in long-neglected study of the English classics. Buddy found him one day deep in the "Faerie Queene."

"Oh, my God!" said Buddy.

Then suddenly he remembered threats. Payments before the end of the year. He also realized that the embarrassingly faithful Bronson, with whom he had

not communicated since his departure from London, must be in some state of inquietude. He lay awake one morning in a cold sweat. Suppose the fool grew scared, and advertised the mysterious disappearance of Sir Atherton Drake !

He sent Tonio to London. That was one of his eternal preoccupations : how to give Tonio jobs ; how to persuade the conscientious and proud little man that he was living on deserved earnings and not on charity. He sent him to London with elaborate instructions to spy out the land, reassure Bronson, and return with his accumulated correspondence. A few learned books picked haphazard from the shelves would maintain in Bronson's mind the fiction of close scholarly pursuits.

Tonio returned with a budget of trivial and important items. Bronson had suffered from great anxiety which now was relieved, although he was at a loss to understand the reason for his unknown and even now unrevealed address. There were few letters. None from Muriel or from Diana. One from Chrysolos in cipher, which he put aside to be decoded. A copy of "The Times" of three days ago, which Bronson, assiduous reader of the august periodical, had marked and handed to Tonio with the puzzled inquiry whether Sir Atherton had seen it. Buddy, whose attitude towards *The Times* was that of Stevenson's hero towards the old *Athenæum*—"Golly, what a paper !" —had scarcely ever opened its pages. But, in this instance, there was no need to do more than glance at the first page. The top line in the column, the head of the so-called agony column, announced :

"Sir Atherton Drake is very seriously requested to communicate with Paternoster before 31st December."

"That's straight from the shoulder, isn't it ?" said Buddy.

"It's a gun at your head," said Tonio.

"Let me get at the beastly man," said Buddy, picking up the fraction-filled page. "Find me the key."

He deciphered:

"I have done all possible. 'The Times' announcement must reach you wherever you are, and no matter how ill you are. It must be cabled to you by your friends or legal representatives. If nothing heard or done by 15th January, on that day papers and proofs will be sent to high authorities. Again let me say I cannot conceive breach so long honourable relations."

"Buddy," said Tonio anxiously, "what is the meaning of this?"

"It means," replied Buddy, "that we've got to get out—and get out damned quick."

It was a situation of tantalizing fantasticality. There was only one thing to be done—the insertion in *The Times* of a reply:

"Paternoster. Lost address. Please give it."

Two or three miserable days followed. Tonio was again despatched to London. He returned with a telegram:

"Lothbury, as usual."

This was something definite. It gave him something to do. He drafted a letter in cipher on some Park Lane Mansions notepaper which Tonio had brought down.

MY DEAR ANDREA,—

I have been very ill and am only now able to attend to business. Your suggestion is most reasonable. But why all this mystery? I can't be bothered with converting money into bonds to bearer. My ordinary cheque should be sufficient. My confidential secretary will make any appointment you like, Park Lane, and will hand you cheque on return of documents of which

he will hold list. Or, if you suspect false dealing cheque, will discuss bearer bonds. Too ill to see you myself.

ATHERTON DRAKE.

A horrible week passed, the latter part of which Tonio spent in London, calling day by day for letters. At last he returned to Southport. The letter addressed to "Andrea Chrysolos, Esq., c/o London & Northern Bank, Lothbury, E.C." had been returned through the Post Office, "Addressee unknown."

Then the fear of God and the fear of more than God got around Buddy. Mysterious and deadly forces were converging upon him. Every succeeding morning of the New Year dawned upon him as he lay in a cold sweat. He took in *The Times*, which reached Southport about midday. He had no use for any of its urbane contents but the ghastly first-page column. One day the top line had nothing but the words, in capital letters:

"Sir Atherton Drake."

He passed the newspaper to Tonio, who remarked:

"It might be Chicago."

"I wish to God it was," cried Buddy. "There I'd find some way out. Here there's none. I'm between the devil and the deep sea."

Tonio shrugged. "If you would only give me your confidence, I might be able to suggest something."

Buddy stared at him for a few moments.

"I believe you're right," he said. "It's unfair on you to keep you in the dark. The only thing is that if we go on working together you'll be what the lawyers call a *particeps criminis*—a partner in crime. You must take the risk."

Tonio smiled, and there was a kindly light in his dark eyes.

"I have too much faith in your goodness, Buddy, to be afraid."

"I'm a fraud, a colossal fraud," said Buddy.

"On the vastness of it," said Tonio gently, with an expressive upward gesture of his maimed hand, "I have not cared to speculate."

"Hell!" said Buddy. "Sit down and I'll tell you all about it."

For the second time he made confession.

The little white-haired man with the dark mobile face regarded him mournfully, asking questions, getting answers now in self-justification, now in frank avowal of wrong-doing.

"You have done a foolish thing," he said. "You have put yourself beyond—what you a-call it?—the pale of the law. All this evil money does not belong to you."

"Of course it doesn't," cried Buddy. "It belongs to an unborn academy and a dead political party."

"Who is to know that?" asked Tonio.

"What do you mean?"

"Who knows what was in the will which you destroyed?"

"Why, the lawyers who drew it up!"

"But they told you they had sent it back to your brother some time before you made your change of identity. He was to alter it. Why should he not have destroyed it before you came? Who can prove that, as Buddy Drake, you ever saw the will? Who can prove that you destroyed the will? That, as you say, is the greatest crime before the law that you have committed."

Buddy wiped a perspiring brow. The room was overheated by a roaring fire, and his blood was overheated by two hours' tensity of emotional living.

"You're damn clever," said he. "Your Italian brain, I suppose. I never thought of it."

"Did you tell the lawyers you had seen the will?"

Buddy plunged into an agony of recollection. "No. I let them tell me."

"Then," said Tonio, "if your brother had destroyed the will and had made no other, you would naturally inherit his estate as next-of-kin, just as you inherit the title."

"That seems to be right; but what are you driving at?"

"I am trying to think for you, Buddy. You have never been able, all the long time I have known you, to think for yourself. You do things without thinking: sometimes wicked things; sometimes silly, silly things; sometimes beautiful things. And that's why I love you and why I trust you and why I know you would share your last bit of bread with me; and why all my devotion——"

"Oh, stop," Buddy interrupted. He knew all that. "I'm a peculiar brand of damned fool with a sort of ballast of decent feeling. And you're one of God's best. Let's leave it at that. Let's come down to earth. You've grasped the situation in a way I'd never have thought possible. You say that, supposing I'm found out as a fraud, no one can prove that I committed the major crime of destroying the will. That, boiling it down, my only provable offence was the false declaration of death."

"I am not a lawyer," said Tonio. "I am only an uneducated Italian-American. But both Italy and America are noted for just horse-sense, Buddy."

"And so you think all's well?"

"I do not," replied Tonio earnestly.

Buddy turned away. There were times when Tonio's

eyes were those of a dog, and at the same time those of an infernal saint in some early Italian picture.

"I do not. By no means," said Tonio. "I think it's all bad. As bad as bad can be."

Buddy lit a cigarette, and threw himself into an arm-chair. The early January twilight creeping into the room began gradually to darken.

"Go on. This promises to be the cheeriest conversation I've had for years."

Tonio went on. Tonio, with his astute intelligence, and with remorseless logic, set out before him his present situation. He reduced it to its simplest factors.

"You have no existence, my poor Buddy," he said. "As Buddy Drake, you buried yourself in your family vault. As Sir Atherton Drake you don't dare exist much longer. If you could pay the man Chrysolos, as your brother would have paid him, things might be different."

"That's it," said Buddy. "If I could only get hold of the fool."

Tonio came forward and touched him on the shoulder.

"But, even if you did, what about all this money? This dishonourable money? This traitor's money, as it seems to me? Don't you think that Chrysolos has had his eye on it all the time? Why do you think your brother willed it away to universities and political parties?"

"He had no one to leave it to except me, whom he loathed."

"And the lady whom he took away from her husband? Couldn't she do, like anyone else, with mucha money?"

Tonio's idea began to penetrate Buddy's brain. He scratched his head as though to facilitate access.

"Good Lord!" he said.

By bequeathing his ill-gotten fortune to an indivi-

dual, Atherton may have been conscious that behind him he was leaving a heritage of woe. Corporations are incapable of suffering from woe. They would look after themselves in their cold, hard-headed way. A drifting woman couldn't. Besides, was there not the possibility that through the callous time-server—to give Atherton the most euphemistic name—there ran one clean streak? Apart from possible danger, he could not leave Muriel this mass of tainted money. It would have taken a far profounder student of human nature than Buddy to solve the question. He knew that men were capable of any outward inconsistencies of conduct that the human mind could conceive. Only a few days ago he had talked with Tonio of a gunman in Cleveland, Ohio, lately apprehended for having shot several families in cold blood, whom they had known as a superb flute-player and the most model and sentimental husband and father of children.

There was Atherton, the passionate scholar, the lover of women, the idolator of all the outer British respectabilities; yet equally unconcerned with his country's safety, with his own honour as a man; and yet again, scrupulous as to the happiness of the woman he loved.

"I give it up," he said.

"Give what up, Buddy?"

"Accounting for Atherton."

"There's a lot more, Buddy, that I think you must give up."

"What?"

"Everything," said Tonio, making a motion in the darkness, with his two withered hands.

He stood in the firelight, white-headed, hollow-eyed, dark-clad, spare and vibrating, an uncanny figure. His broken shadow fell grotesque on the opposite wall.

"Give it all up, Buddy. Buddy Drake is dead. Atherton Drake must be dead too. As I said—you have no existence. You must create one for yourself —a new one. . . ."

The little man went on for awhile, and Buddy sat under his spell. At last he rose and said in an amaze:

"How the devil did you learn all this?"

Tonio crossed the room and switched on the light. The wizardry of his elfin figure before the glow of the fire had vanished. He was just the pathetic little elderly Tonio.

"I told you before. By conjuring," he said.

Buddy helped himself to a drink from the sideboard. Then:

"For any sake let's have a bit of time off. My head's going round. I'll go mad. Let's have an hour's practice."

"Very well," said Tonio. "I have some new things come this morning from London. Made to my specification. A new invention, Buddy. You shall see. They're in my room. I'll unpack the case. You are right. It doesn't do anybody good to think too long of dreadful things."

Buddy responded to his smile. "You're a wonderful chap, Tonio. God knows what I'd do without you."

What he immediately did without him was to clap his hands to an aching head and plunge his thoughts back again into the whirlpool of his brother's life.

On a straight-backed chair, in a corner of the formal and soulless hotel sitting-room, stood the black steel despatch-box, container of hideous and shameful secrets. He strode towards it. These he could get rid of for ever, at any rate. He took out the armful of documents, cast them on the hearth-rug, and then threw them, chunk by chunk, into the fire whose coals he stirred with the poker into leaping flames.

Tonio came in, followed by hotel servants carrying a mass of velvet and steel paraphernalia. He looked in alarm at the fire, at Buddy—and signed to the servants to put his bundle down and depart.

"What have you done?" he cried, as soon as the door closed.

"I've burned the whole damned thing."

"But, my God!" cried Tonio, with eyes of despair, "don't you know what you have done? You have, in fact, burned your boats. You have burned every defence your brother could have held against Chrysolos."

"No!" cried Buddy, staring at him open-mouthed.

"Yes. Do you suppose a man like your brother would keep things only incriminating to himself? It's not common sense."

Tonio went on. Buddy smote his brow.

"Of course. It stands to reason. Why should Chrysolos be content with so little? What is a thousand pounds—five thousand dollars—a year to a blackmailer who knows the other man has hundreds of thousands? Why was he content? Because he knew that your brother, who was not a fool like you, could reply with those papers and he would be . . . pst!"

He snapped his fingers in an expressive upward gesture.

"Be what?" said Buddy.

"Be? Be bust, *Dio*! Don't you see? They held papers against each other like hands in a poker-game. It was to be a game of bluff to the end. Chrysolos has called your bluff. You've thrown your hand into the fire."

"He doesn't know that," said Buddy.

"He soon will," said Tonio.

"What am I to do?" asked Buddy.

"That I don't know," said Tonio very sadly. "How

should a poor fellow like me know? I can only tell you what I think of the muddle that you're in."

Buddy took a last gulp of his drink.

"Supposing you were in my position, what would you do?"

"I would first go to my confessor and clear my conscience."

"But I haven't any confessor, and I haven't anything so heavy on my conscience. So that's no good. Let us be practical. You know everything about me and Atherton. Apparently more than I know myself. What would you advise?"

"I?" He looked up at Buddy with a wrinkle at the corner of his lips and a twinkle in his dark eyes. And he kept the pose dramatically for a few moments. Then he went to a little side table on which lay the two or three packs of cards used for their daily practice. He spread out a pack with his swift, professional touch and brought out a Knave of Clubs.

"What would I advise? Well, look you here, Buddy. This is you. The Jack of Clubs. See? What I advise for you is to do like him. See?"

Buddy could have sworn that the Knave of Clubs flicked upwards by Tonio's fingers had disappeared into thin air.

"God! How did you do that?"

"You will only learn," said Tonio, "when you do the same as he did."

CHAPTER XV

THEY returned to London and put up, under false names, at a small hotel in Cromwell Road which was far enough away from the sphere of Atherton's activities. They seemed to have disappeared completely. Nothing new appeared in the agony column of *The Times*. Buddy and Tonio had many arguments.

"You see, we've called Chrysolos's bluff and nothing has happened."

"That doesn't mean that nothing will happen," urged Tonio.

"Let us wait until it does."

Tonio would shrug desperate shoulders. Something would surely happen, and that very soon. He passed unhappy days. Buddy grew impatient.

"You're a Latin and you're superstitious. If you see a black cat rubbing itself against a lamp-post you think there's a policeman waiting for me round the corner."

"I feel that some day there will be hundreds waiting."

Then arose the question of their ultimate land of refuge. Tonio counselled America. Buddy manifested lukewarm enthusiasm. He had spent there too many hopeless and bitter years.

"What can be more hopeless and bitter than the time you are passing now in England?" asked Tonio.

Buddy agreed that his life was none of the

pleasantest. It was a loafing life devoid of purpose. Anyhow, before taking flight he must put his house in order. Bronson, for instance, must be provided for. He entrusted Tonio with many confidential errands, Tonio giving out to those whom it concerned that Sir Atherton lay ill in a nursing-home abroad, guarded by doctors who forbade him to hold any communication with the outside world. Tonio's credentials, amounting to a kind of power of attorney, signed by Atherton Drake, were not contested.

The days hung heavy on Buddy's hands. He took to walking after dusk, with apparent aimlessness, about the streets of the West End. Now and then Tonio accompanied him. Once they turned down Sloane Street. Midway, on the eastern side, Buddy stopped short before the window of an antique furniture shop—Merro, Ltd.—and suddenly gripped Tonio by the arm. Inside the shop, talking with a man and a woman, obviously customers, stood Diana. She was displaying a chair, evidently pointing out its signs of genuineness. Her face was smiling and animated.

"God!" cried Buddy. "What wouldn't I give to be able to go in? This is the first time I've caught sight of her."

"Come away, Buddy," said Tonio. "Such things are foolish."

Buddy allowed himself to be led from the window. He gave a short laugh.

"If I could only get a glimpse of her any time, I think I could stick it."

"One more reason for your going away at once," said Tonio. "There's no sense in playing round like this."

"Have I ever done anything with any sense in it in my life?" asked Buddy.

"You bought my monkeys," said the little man.

"By the way, where are they?" Buddy asked. "I wouldn't lose them for anything."

The next time Tonio went on a mission to Bronson, he was charged to rescue the sacred crew from the flat. Whether they had brought him good or evil luck, in the general sense of the word, he knew not; at any rate, they had brought him Tonio Gaffarelli and his sagacity and loyal devotion. He shuddered to think of what his loneliness would be without Tonio.

The occasion of the salvage of the monkeys was the last on which Tonio was to visit Bronson. For Bronson had been paid his £4000 and was awaiting final instructions. These Tonio conveyed. The flat was to be prepared for a long absence on the part of the owner, shut up, and the keys were to be delivered to Mr. Edgar Fry.

It was a fine evening with a touch of frost in the air. Buddy walked with him for company's sake up Park Lane and halted at Upper Brook Street. When he saw Tonio disappear into the beam of light that marked the entrance to the flats he turned to while away the time of waiting by walking round the quadrilateral formed by Upper Brook Street, Davies Street, Grosvenor Street, and Park Lane. Tonio, his errand fulfilled, by taking the opposite course would necessarily meet him.

He had twice made the circuit and was standing at the Upper Brook Street corner when he saw Tonio dart from the mansions. Immediately at his heels darted another man who, overtaking him, made a sudden grab at the large cardboard box which Tonio carried under his arm. Buddy sprang forward with a "What the devil are you doing?" and then, all of a sudden, he and his pursuer stood stock-still, glaring into each other's eyes.

"So you are Atherton after all."

"And you're Chrysolos, my blackmailing Greek friend, who gave me the key to the famous cipher."

"Why keep up the farce?" said the other angrily. "You fooled me once. You'll not do it again. How do I know you're Atherton? Isn't this Italian well known as Atherton's secretary? And here I find you waiting for him and this box of papers which you're too frightened to go and get for yourself."

Buddy laughed. "My good friend, suppose I am Atherton Drake, what reason can you have for trying to steal my papers?"

"Papers? Mr. Chrysolos thinks they are papers?" cried Tonio, laughing too.

"You're welcome to any documents you find there," said Buddy.

"Shall I show him?" asked Tonio.

Buddy nodded. Tonio undid the parcel and filled Buddy's arms with the monkeys. Chrysolos shook with restrained anger.

"Fooled you again, haven't I?" said Buddy.

Chrysolos cursed. Tonio repacked the monkeys.

"I'll be even with you yet," cried the Greek.

"Don't make a scene," said Buddy quietly, hands on hips. "We don't want a crowd, and to be told to pass along by the police. I had to stop you being quarrelsome, I remember, the last time we met."

"Tell me," said Chrysolos impatiently, though in a lower tone, "why haven't I heard from you?"

"Because you're a most undesirable correspondent. On the other hand, why haven't you carried out your threats? You can't. You know you can't. I was a fool to let you blackmail me for so long. You can do exactly what you like." He snapped his fingers. "I'm through with you."

Tonio's heart beat quick. This was bluffing with a vengeance.

"That is all childish talk," Chrysolos said. "You are afraid. You skulk about in the dark and daren't ever go to your flat. When I call this evening your servant tells me that you are at death's door in a nursing-home in France. Scarcely has the door been shut in my face when up comes your secretary and is at once admitted. I wait, naturally, for your secretary, in order to ask him questions. Then I run into you skulking in the dark." He shrugged. "Of course you're afraid."

"And you—you're afraid," Buddy retorted. "I've got cipher documents too, which I can hold up against you. Though, why you should think I'd carry them about in a cardboard box, I can't imagine."

"You seem to forget the dressmakers' boxes that went through the hands of the lady in Turtle Road, Ealing."

Buddy started and looked for a few seconds stupidly into the dark eyes of his enemy. Then he gave a short laugh. Good Lord! Was this the secret of Atherton's relations with Cora Blenkinsop, the mysterious lady of the will? She was the go-between. Atherton must have puddled through much muddy water.

"I forgive you, Chrysolos," he said. "You went on the theory that criminals always work the same way. Well, you're mistaken. Anyhow, you can take it from me that you'll never see the documents again. And, if you're wise and good, no human eye will ever see them."

He felt Tonio tug at his sleeve. It was a warning tug. Wasn't he carrying his bluff too far? He looked instinctively at the little man still clutching his precious monkeys. The interchange of glances was not lost on the keen eyes of the Greek.

"I'm not afraid of those documents," he said.

Buddy stopped a passing taxi and bade Tonio enter. With his foot on the step he turned to Chrysolos.

"Good night. I'm a bit tired of you."

Chrysolos said grimly:

"Do you want to know why I'm not afraid? Because I believe those documents don't exist any longer."

He went off. Buddy gave the Cromwell Road address to the driver in a very low voice and they drove off.

"I suppose you're pleased with yourself," said Tonio.

"I don't get much amusement nowadays," replied Buddy. "What else was there to do but call his bluff?"

"I think he called yours."

"What do you mean?"

"The papers you burned in Southport."

"Damn!" cried Buddy, starting forward.

He would have been still less amused had he been aware of another taxi tracking him down to his hotel in the Cromwell Road.

A few days afterwards Tonio found at the accommodation address in Kensington which he had given the unsuspecting Bronson a long envelope which, when Buddy opened it, enclosed one headed, "On His Majesty's Service," addressed to Sir Atherton Drake, Bt., and bearing the Foreign Office stamp. Buddy opened it with shaking fingers. It ran:

SIR,

I am desired by the Permanent Secretary to ask you to do him the honour of waiting on him at this office on Tuesday at three o'clock.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient Servant,
JOHN HAYTHORNE,
Private Secretary.

He passed it on to Tonio to read.

"The hunt's up," he said.

But he did not wait on the Foreign Secretary of the War Office as requested. Neither did he acknowledge the letter. He and Tonio busied themselves with hurried preparations for departure. And, even while making these preparations, he became aware that one of two men was always somewhere within his horizon. He had the horrible knowledge of being shadowed.

Even as they climbed the gangway of a steamer at Southampton he saw an impassive-looking man standing in the gloom, watching and watching until the steamer left the docks.

CHAPTER XVI

"IF she would only see me," said Horatio Flower.

"You must give her time," said Diana.

They were sitting outside the Royalty Bar which is just across the way from the Park Palace, on one of the little hills of Monte Carlo. It was a bright March morning; one of the mornings when the Mediterranean air is interinfused blue and gold. A hum of talk came through the open door of the bar; around them sounded the sharper notes of talk and laughter from the tables, umbrella-shaded like their own.

"I've given her loads of time," said Horatio. "Four months. How much more does she want?"

"Why on earth should you expect me to know?"

Horatio made a helpless gesture. "I thought you might. I hoped, if you gave me this little opportunity of talking to you, you might be able to help me."

"I've been trying to do that all the time. Not for your sake but for Muriel's."

"But why not a bit for my sake too? I'm not really much like the fellow that married Cousin Amy in 'Locksley Hall.' I don't pretend to be much, of course, but I'm honest and sober and I think I'm proving that I love her as much as ever I did."

"That's what beats me," said Diana.

He met her frank eyes in which there always glowed a spark of mockery.

"Why?"

"The world's full of women. It reeks with them. Women of all sorts; good, bad, indifferent—Aspasias, Cleopatras, Griseldas, Madonnas—to suit all tastes. You've only got to go about and take your pick."

He acknowledged her sally with a short laugh.

"I'm not interested in women, saving your presence," he said. "Never have been. I'm interested in one woman, who happens to be Muriel. Funny, perhaps, but so it is."

Diana bent over the little table and laid her brown hand on his arm and said earnestly:

"And you really forgive her from the bottom of your heart?"

"I do. If I didn't, I couldn't reconcile it to my conscience to ask her to come back to me. If she thinks I'm going to reproach her afterwards and make her life a misery, you may tell her that I shan't. When I say a thing is wiped out, it's wiped out. I can't conceive myself being such an unutterable cad as to ask her to come back under false pretences."

Diana withdrew her hand from his arm, and, for a while, fiddled with her cocktail glass.

"I wish," she said, "you had thought of talking things over with me before."

He admitted his stupidity. On the other hand, he had not been assured of a sympathetic reception.

"You always seemed to have your knife into me," he said.

"I suppose I did. I championed Muriel through thick and thin."

"And now?"

She laughed. "I'm doing it still. But all the same, it's a pity we didn't have all this out long ago."

Indeed, this was their first meeting for many months. Horatio Flower, in the vain hope of being one day admitted to the Menton villa where Muriel lived under

the wing of her friend, Lady Dolly Valentine, had spent a bored and unhappy winter in Cannes. Diana, absorbed in the tricky fortunes of Merro, Ltd., her Renaissance furniture shop in Sloane Street, had remained in London. A sudden miracle of a sale, coinciding with a run-down condition consequent on peculiar worry and detestable weather, had sent her South in search of sunshine, fresh health and furniture. On her way to Italy to restock furniture for Merro, Ltd., she had paused at the Villa Seraphina at Menton, to stock health and sunshine for herself. The coast papers announced her arrival, for no one could slink obscurely into the villa of so reputed a hostess as Lady Dolly Valentine. Thus Horatio Flower, at Cannes, became informed of the presence of Diana Merrow at Menton. She had responded to his invitation to a more or less midway meeting at Monte Carlo.

"Anyhow," he said, "it's tremendously kind of you to come now."

"It seemed to be the only sensible thing to do."

They talked round about the matter for some time, as humans will; and then he asked her directly:

"What are my chances?"

She reflected. "Good, I think. You must remember Muriel has been dreadfully mauled, inside her—just like anyone physically mauled by a hyena. She hasn't recovered yet. She hasn't a ghost of anything like love for him left. How could she? But her self-respect, her sex-vanity—that sort of thing—have all been lacerated. She feels disfigured, if you know what I mean, and is afraid to show herself—to you, at any rate—until her wounds heal and there aren't any scars remaining. That's what I meant when I told you to give her time."

Horatio Flower made a little gesture of acceptance of the inevitable.

"You're right. You're a good sort, Diana. I wish to God we had been friends all along."

"So do I," said Diana. "You must also remember," she added, after a pause, "that all this publicity and mystery and newspaper talk doesn't do much towards the healing I've been talking about."

He looked aside, with contracted brows, and a look of pain came into his eyes.

"That's the devil of it. I'm in a far worse tangle in it all than you or Muriel could possibly conceive." A waiter hovered over the table. "Another?" She declined and rose. He paid the bill.

"I must get back."

His brows puckered in disappointment.

"Oh, why? We've only just skimmed over things. There's lots more we must talk about."

She gave hesitating reasons. She was expected back to lunch at the Villa Seraphina. Her run over to Monte Carlo in Lady Dolly's car had but an hour's shopping for excuse. He urged. She wavered. There was always the telephone, and a chance-met friend. She yielded. Between the masterfulness of Lady Dolly and the flaccidity of Muriel, life at the Villa Seraphina had its drawbacks.

"I must have food," she laughed.

"I've not heard of a famine in Monte Carlo," he said, with unwonted playfulness.

"Well, somewhere quiet, in a corner, where one can talk."

They went to Quinto's, discreet and bandless, and found their quiet corner.

"You quite see," she said, resuming the talk where it had been broken off, "that all the publicity is upsetting." She made a little impatient gesture. "Upsetting to everybody. What has happened to him? The papers are full of the missing baronet.

Full, too, of dark hints that it's a jolly good thing he's missing. Rumours of scandal going around. Not in the newspapers. No, nothing to do with women."

"I know. Idiot reports that he was a German spy during the War."

"Quite so. They are idiotic. I happen to have seen a side of Atherton that no one would suspect."

"So have I, my dear," said Horatio with a curious smile. "And, to tell you the truth, that's why I'm here waiting until I can win back Muriel."

"I suppose," said Diana, with a flash, "that was when he forced his way in to you last December in Hampshire."

Horatio laid down his fork in surprise.

"How did you know I saw him? I haven't told a human being!"

Diana smiled. "Smith told Bronson, and Bronson told me."

"I gave Smith the strictest orders. Damn the fellow!" cried Horatio.

"And Atherton gave him a ten-pound tip for letting him in."

"Smith told me that himself," said Horatio.

"There's one honest man about, anyhow," said Diana. "Look, I want to know. I've all kinds of reasons for wanting to know. What did Atherton say to you when—well, then?"

Horatio drank half a glass of wine, wiped his lips unnecessarily and looked uncomfortable.

"There are things one man may say to another that can't be repeated. We must leave it at that."

"And *that*," cried Diana across the table, "is exasperating. *That*, the fact of his having seen you, of his having promised (that's what it comes to) to

fade out of Muriel's life, of your having parted more or less friends, that is what's worrying me to death."

"Does Muriel know?"

She checked at his question. For the moment Muriel had faded into a shadow.

"I told her, of course."

"And what did she say?"

She replied impatiently:

"What does Muriel ever say? But she's a sentient being and must think—and she's a woman. I spoke about mauling. Well, it's obvious."

The simple meal progressed mechanically. Except for the mere satisfaction of physical needs, it had no significance.

"If you won't tell me what passed between you on that visit," said Diana, "you won't. And that's an end of it. But to me the idea is beastly. If you were a different kind of man, I can conceive Atherton, the man who lives in a hollow mask of respectability, precious respectability, his whole reason for living, I can conceive him offering you a bribe to let him clear out. That's grotesque. On the other hand, if he had come to you and said: 'My dear fellow, I'm utterly fed up with her and, if the divorce goes through, I'd no more think of marrying her than of cutting my throat,' you'd have kicked the worm out of the house, wouldn't you?"

"Possibly."

"Certainly. You know you would," she cried, her dark face aglow. "You would have kicked him until there was nothing left of him to kick."

Horatio pondered over the proposition. He replied:

"This is a queer world. Perhaps the queerest of all possible worlds."

"Well, as I've told you," said Diana, "this particular queerness of it is worrying me to death."

Horatio glanced at her for a second; glanced away with a puzzled brow. His training had not been such as to enable him to appreciate quietly emotional values. Why should Diana, to his mind the most level-headed, the coldest, the most cynical of young women, be worried to death by Atherton's part in his own unhappy triangular affairs? Obviously she was unaware of Atherton's death and the supplanting brother. To her, as to Muriel, and to the world in general, the supplanter was Atherton all the time.

"If Muriel's through with him and only wants time to heal her hurts, as you tell me," he said at last, "I don't see why you, personally, need worry."

"That's what I've been telling myself for a very long time," replied Diana. "But what you've told me of your interview with him, or rather what you haven't told me—confidence between man and man, et cetera—makes me inclined to worry all the more."

"But why?" he asked somewhat insistently.

"Because," she almost whispered, "you must have noticed, as I did, the change in the man."

He made a faint gesture, half in assent, half non-committal.

"I first became aware of it," she continued, "when he met me in Paris in the winter—when Muriel was so ill. I hadn't seen him for a long time You know I hated him for a dried-up prig. The ideal prig. A museum specimen. I only suffered him for Muriel's sake. I saw as little as I could of him. But in Paris we were thrown together—perhaps it was my doing. I don't know. Anyhow, he seemed to have been treating Muriel for the past two or three weeks pretty casually. I thought I'd bring him to heel. I wasn't afraid of him. Muriel was. God knows why. I met him, I say, in Paris, a different man altogether, with just a kind of surface priggishness, but under-

neath it a man full of the love of life and laughter, and simple. The last time I went to see him in Paris, he had stuck a row of clockwork monkeys on his mantelpiece. Said he had bought them from an ex-British grenadier who was selling toys on the boulevards. One might just as well have thought of Atherton dressed up in a false wig and beard selling toys himself. Can a man go suddenly mad, and yet, to all outward appearances, stay perfectly sane?"

"Don't ask me," replied Horatio. "What do I know about such things?"

"Nothing, of course. I was only putting the case. But there it is. The only priggishness and callousness and cold-bloodedness about him was his attitude to Muriel. From the first moment I met him his whole idea seemed to be to cut it all out. He was utterly vile to her. Vile."

She spat the word out across the table at Horatio's stolid face; the face of ten thousand Englishmen the world over when they confront the impossible. She felt a tiny shock of exasperation as she became aware of his impenetrability. There he sat, with his well-trimmed, slightly crinkled brown hair, his florid face, his little military moustache, his obstinate chin, his blue eyes from which he seemed to have the uncanny power of withdrawing expression.

"Why don't you say something?" she cried with an impatient clap on the table. "Why don't you say 'Damn the fellow'? He behaved like a beast and a cad to Muriel."

Horatio passed his cigarette-case across to Diana. After a while he said deliberately, his eyes following a puff of smoke:

"Hasn't it occurred to you that he may have acted like an honourable man—a very honourable man—both to Muriel and to me?"

She shrugged. "Well, if you are satisfied, that's your affair. I'm not. And I'll tell you why. Look at the position as a whole."

The position as a whole, as she set it out before him, was fantastic enough, its shaky equilibrium maintained by opposing forces. The human story, as seen through her bewildered eyes, was incredible. The first postulate must be the original Atherton: young University intellectual; politician; Minister of the Crown; fine scholar of European reputation; all the time aloof, dry, valetudinarian; intolerably precise, priggish, studiously polished in manner; with some hidden unconjecturable element of sex personality that could lure away a non-temperamental woman like Muriel from a virile good-fellow of a husband. That was Atherton as she had known him before their disconcerting dinner at Fouquet's. From then onwards all her preconceived values of Atherton had been changed. A new human being with a totally different set of values, relations between the tones, the lights and shades of character, had arisen. An Atherton who no longer posed as a valetudinarian; who no longer bored you with philosophic disquisition, whose very speech was that of the ordinary man, free from pedantic phraseology; who regarded Muriel as a tiresome young woman of no account; who then, by some queer juggling, got rid of her to his own satisfaction and to that of Horatio. A man of suddenly developed or acquired qualities of graciousness, charm, manhood. And then . . .

And now, this extraordinary public scandal. The disappearance of Sir Atherton Drake. Very guarded newspaper references; very much less restrained social gossip. The man's career resembled nothing more than an incoherent moving picture invented by an idiot.

Those were the facts, undeniable. What did Horatio

make of them? Atherton an honest man? He said, rather helplessly:

"I've told you all I can."

"But not all you know. There's only one solution," said Diana. "Some form of madness. Either he was mad until I met him in Paris and then became sane —or vice versa."

The little restaurant had gradually emptied. They were alone. The bill had been paid some time before. An under-waiter hung about vaguely near the door.

"He's not the same man," she declared.

A humorous light glowed in Horatio Flower's blue eyes.

"Supposing there were two personalities, as you suggest, you found yourself rather in a fix. You detested the first, and you're very much attracted by the second."

She sat, elbows on table, chin on hands, bending forward. A flush came on her olive face.

"Suppose I am," she said defiantly, "what then? You ask me why I should worry. Now you can guess why. You and I can talk pretty nakedly, can't we? Well, I'm modern in my ideas. But there are elemental things that give me shivers. I know that by law and by the Church a man can marry his deceased wife's sister. To me it's physically horrid. You see what I mean. Well, the new Atherton has upset me altogether."

"Has he——?"

"Of course he has," Diana interrupted. "And I can't get him out of my head."

"Thanks for telling me," said Horatio, feeling like the Veronese gentleman in Shakespeare, that in any case he would be forsworn, and unconsciously manifesting his distress. "But this complicates things dreadfully."

"I don't see why it should. It rather simplifies them—as between you and Muriel; which is all that matters."

"Let us go and get a little fresh air on the subject," said Horatio.

So they walked down through the gardens, across the Casino square, and on to the lower terrace looking over the sea. But the fresh air did not aid Horatio in his dilemma. On the contrary, one touch of mistral in the breeze blew away certain cobwebs that had been gathering about his brain. To betray Buddy's confidence would doubtless go far towards his winning of Muriel and would solve Diana's perplexing problem. But an incautious word from either of them might set the police on the track of Buddy Drake, who, once caught and tried for falsifying a death register, impersonation and forgery, would undoubtedly be sentenced to a term of penal servitude. It was a risk too great to run, even though he might be tempted to consider that the happiness of four people justified him in breaking his word. The position was further complicated by the fact of Buddy's disappearance under the guise of Atherton, with very good reason, as Atherton, apparently, to disappear.

"Well?" asked Diana, after a long silence. "What has the fresh air done?"

"Nothing. It seems to me you're the only person that can do anything. If only you could get hold of him and make him explain things. He'd do it, I'm sure, if——"

"If what?"

"Hang it all, Diana," he exclaimed, "you're a woman. I'm not."

"So that's all you can tell me?"

"That's all," said Horatio.

A short while afterwards he saw her to the car

and they parted with promises to meet in the near future.

"I'll fight your battle with Muriel," she said.

She drove off, heavy-hearted, more perturbed in mind than she had ever been in her resolute young life. The beauty of the bay brought her no relief. It was an aching blue that intensified the ache in her soul.

CHAPTER XVII

FOR the opportunity of questioning him, getting at the heart of his secret, had presented itself and she had let it slip.

It had come a couple of months before.

It was a dreary afternoon of January rain. She stood among her show-room stock of Italian furniture, painted beds, commodes, *cassone*, chimney-pieces, della Robbia plaques, and looked through the plate-glass window at the dripping umbrellas and streaming pavements and wet cars glistening in the conflicting lights of the broad thoroughfare. Not a customer, endowed with sanity, at any rate, to be expected at such a time. Her salesman was having his tea in a grubby store-room at the back. Her secretary was engaged in the office over accounts, possibly with a cup of tea beside her. Diana herself was on duty. The furniture of a far-past epoch, crammed crudely together, in spite of her peculiar talent for arrangement, oppressed her with a sense of forlorn homelessness. Each piece in its way was good; subtly placed in harmonious surroundings it would shyly proclaim itself a thing of beauty. When jammed together the pieces had ceased to be shy. They quarrelled like a lot of nerve-ridden women herded in seclusion. For no justifiable reason she felt herself to be one of them.

She longed for the closing-hour when she would slip round to her little flat close by, and sit and read a book and sip a Martini and smoke and luxuriate in

its restful jumble of the comfort of all the styles. Not a stiff bit of preciosity anywhere ; just snugness, soft chairs, cushions, a blazing fire, a welcoming array of books—any old books with no pretension to binding—in fitted bookcases, and the dozen or so pictures she loved. There would also be a dog for company.

Mr. Pilkington, the salesman, was taking an unconscionable time over his tea. He was the kind of earnest, sallow man to whom his tea was a materialized sacrament. For relaxation he played the oboe in an amateur orchestral society somewhere near the Crystal Palace. As a human being Diana had little use for him. As a furniture expert and authoritative salesman he was invaluable. When would the fool finish his uninspiring meal and relieve her, so that she could get away from the stark unreality of this death-like shop ?

And it rained and it rained outside—the rain beat against the plate-glass windows so that they streamed, and the outer world became a dim, prismatic blur.

Suddenly the shop door burst open and a man came in. His coat glistened with raindrops and water dripped from the turned-down brim of his hat. She made a step forward, then halted suddenly as their eyes met. It was Buddy. He took off his hat, looked at it with a short laugh.

" I'm afraid to put it down anywhere. It'll spoil things. I'll throw it on the mat. How are you, Diana ? "

She took his hand mechanically. He laughed.

" Forgive my breaking in like this. Especially on such a beast of an evening. I'd no idea one could get so wet just walking down Sloane Street."

" Why should you walk in the rain ? " she asked. " It doesn't seem to fit in with your general habits."

"My general habits have changed considerably the last few weeks."

"So I've been given to understand," she said coldly.

He looked around him at the cheerless masterpieces of painted furniture, and glanced at her with a whimsical smile.

"Won't you ask me to sit down? If I take off my coat and fold it up wet side inwards, and put my hat on it and stick it on the floor, there'll be no danger of spoiling anything, and I can sit on a chair."

She said in an even voice:

"I don't particularly want to talk to you, but if you insist——"

"I do insist, Diana," he said, taking off his coat. "It's my last chance of seeing you for God knows how long."

There was that in his eyes which softened a little the heart which she had been at such pains, since their last interview, to harden against him.

"We can't talk in the shop. It would be idiotic. Besides, Mr. Pilkington, the salesman, will be here in a minute. I'll turn Miss Taylor out of the office."

The secretary, not unaccustomed to be dispossessed when the Head and a Wealthy Customer desired private conclave, took her books and fountain-pen to the desk at the back of the shop, and Diana and Buddy entered the comfortless little room. It was furnished with a desk and a swivel-chair behind it, and in front of it a stiff arm-chair for the customer. Diana seated herself in the swivel-chair. Buddy laughed again.

"I've come to see Diana, not the Managing Director of Merro, Ltd." He pushed a basket of papers aside and sat on a corner of the table. He tipped up the shade of the reading-lamp and looked at her in its full

light and, before she had time to make her instinctive action of indignant protest, he cried:

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever known!"

She pulled the shade down angrily.

"If you talk like that, you must go."

"I'll have to go in a few minutes, anyway," he said. "And go for good."

"So much the better," she said, leaning back and looking at him defiantly, her face now in shadow. "But I hope it is for good. Do you remember the last words you said to me?"

"Perfectly well. I asked you to forget that such a damned fool as I ever existed. You said you would. Have you?"

She scoffed. "Practically. Especially since I found out you had gone down to Newstead and bargained with Horatio Flower over Muriel."

Buddy started, and asked incredulously:

"He told you?"

"No."

She explained impatiently the Smith-Bronson channel of information.

"I could kill the fellow," cried Buddy, bringing his fist down on the desk. "I gave him ten pounds to keep his mouth shut."

"I can quite understand your doing all kinds of dirty things. I could forgive you for lots of them. But for bargaining with Horatio I'll never forgive you until I'm dead."

Buddy slipped from the desk and walked a pace or two and rubbed his head. It was an unexpected blow, which for a moment sent him staggering.

"I'm sorry you take it that way," he said in a low voice. "As a matter of fact, my seeing Horatio was one of the finest things I've done in my rotten life."

Her body swayed in scornful protest.

"What do you mean? Your rotten life—that I'll agree to. But a fine action? What was it? Face the facts. A man brings an action for divorce against his wife, naming you as co-respondent—an undefendable case. You go and see him, bargain with him to let you off. Horatio's not a fool. He must have his price—there are two sides to a bargain. Oh, no! God forgive you for thinking I was thinking of it! Not money. Horatio would have killed you on sight if you had suggested such a thing. But there was a price. What was it? Dishonour, something mean—unspeakable."

She was staring at him, sitting bolt upright in the chair, the palms of her hands on the table. He raised a hand.

"There was a price, of course. But it was honourable—as far as a hunted devil like me can be honourable. And it was nothing mean. It was something big. Very big. Unspeakable?" He smiled warily. "Perhaps. But in a different sense of the word from yours."

She shrugged her shoulders. "You're talking in riddles. How on earth do you expect me to understand?"

He replied:

"I expect nothing. It wasn't I who brought up the subject, was it?" He sat down in the customer's chair and lit a cigarette. "I came in because I had to. I couldn't leave England for ever without seeing you to bid you good-bye. I was also crazy enough to think I might carry away some hope with me."

"What hope, my dear Atherton?"

"That you might accept—what shall I say?—my heart, a bit of my heart, as a hostage—in pawn, if you like—to redeem it some day when I've made good."

The note of humility and truth in the man's voice smote her. She caught her breath at queer vibrations through her body. Scarcely knowing what she did, she rose and went round to him and touched his shoulder.

"I wish I could understand. You've changed so much. You're no longer the same person."

"Perhaps not," he said, looking up with pain in his eyes. "I used to be a sham and now I'm real. Or the other way about? God knows."

"But there's always Muriel," she said.

"Yes," he replied hopelessly. "There's always Muriel. Was—not is. Nor ever will be. Well, I must be going. I've one or two things to do and a train to catch. A train to America."

"Now?" she asked incredulously.

"Now. You needn't tell anybody. I'd rather no one knew I'd slipped in this afternoon. That's why I dismissed my taxi at the top of Sloane Street and walked here through the rain. Sir Atherton Drake, Baronet, is leaving England under a cloud."

She stared aghast. Such a contingency had not occurred to her in her wildest speculations on the strange messages concerning him in the personal column of *The Times*; especially the one menacing set of capitals: "SIR ATHERTON DRAKE." In her speculations, too, on his disappearance from the ken of the perplexed Bronsons, on the sudden paying off with a small fortune of the same Bronsons through an impersonal firm of lawyers and the shutting up of the Park Lane flat.

She questioned him. He answered as evasively as he could. He had got mixed up with a set of nasty, dangerous people. It had been a question of blackmail, of course. Now conditions had changed. The blackmail was at an end. They were going to strike and strike quick.

"If it's blackmail," she flashed, "why don't you stand up against them in court?"

"They strike in the dark—and I'm not altogether an innocent lamb. I'm utterly helpless." He laughed somewhat harshly. "God! If I could only tell you how grotesquely helpless I am!"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know that the most unlikely people have gone crash in their time. But they've nearly always been mixed up in enormous financial schemes—Jabez Balfour, Whitaker Wright, and so on. But you?" She looked at him sharply. "It isn't finance, is it?"

"Good Lord, no!" smiled Buddy, to whom all financial transactions beyond the simplest buying and selling were dark mysteries. And, as she seemed reassured on the point, he grew serious and added, "And it has nothing to do with personal morality either. All said and done, I've led a pretty clean life. If I hadn't, I shouldn't be here."

She sighed. There was something about the man that called to her and found reluctant response.

She said, as she had said and thought before, as she was to say and think many times afterwards:

"If I didn't know you were Atherton Drake, I should take you for some one quite different. You don't seem to think the same thoughts. You don't speak the same language."

For a moment he stood like a man whose heart is beating hard. She was not to know that he was fighting a great temptation; not to know that the question, "Why not? Why not?" was racking his brain.

Presently he turned from her with a helpless movement, and picked up the greatcoat and hat which he had brought in from the shop.

"I oughtn't to have come in and worried you. But

when a man loves a woman, and doesn't know whether he'll ever see her again, he may be forgiven for making a fool of himself."

He shook himself into his coat.

"Good-bye, my dear. This is the end of it. Think as well of me as you can."

She stood, weak and wondering. Suddenly his arm was around her, his lips on hers, and as suddenly he released her and strode to the office door.

She recovered quickly. Her balanced sense of the fitness of things made her cry arrestingly:

"Atherton!"

He paused, his hand on the door-handle.

"This is a business establishment," she said in a voice pitched higher than she was aware of. "I must see you out politely."

He held the door open for her to pass through. They entered the shop. At the desk, the secretary made show of adding up figures in books. Mr. Pilkington, the salesman, was talking to a vague, scrubby man in a bowler hat. Diana accompanied Buddy across the place to the shop door.

"Good-bye," she said, in conventional tones.

"Good-bye, Miss Merrow." He paused, added in a quick whisper, "If you want to give me a crumb of comfort, do use that dressing-case I sent you for Christmas from Southport."

He smiled, waved a hand and fled into the rain, while she stood looking stupidly through the glass door.

Mr. Pilkington, seeing her disengaged, came down the shop followed by the scrubby man.

"This, Miss Merrow," he said, "is Mr. Marten of Tillotson's."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Merrow," said Mr. Marten, politely taking off his hat. "I was just

asking Mr. Pilkington if you'd be interested in a Chinese-Venetian corner-cupboard we've got the refusal of. It's out of our line, but we could get it reasonably for you on commission."

She looked through the man, totally devoid, for the moment, of interest in corner-cupboards. She scarcely heard him as he praised the piece. It had a pedigree. It was of the fine period; a museum bit. Normally she prided herself on her knowledge and appreciation of this pretty, bastard Chinoiserie-Renaissance art, and she would have pricked up attentive ears to a proposition on the subject coming from a firm of Tillotson's reputation. But now she was blind to the importance of this bit of wood painted in flat colours, light yellow and green most likely. She felt that her mind was away outside, wandering confusedly, if not insanely, through the pouring rain, following a wraith, and seeking it knew not what.

"Here are some photographs," said Mr. Marten.

"I think it might be worth considering, Miss Merrow," said Mr. Pilkington in the cold, unenthusiastic tone of the prospective buyer, so different from his salesman's persuasive voice.

"Of course it is," she said irritably. "Go and consider it. Look at it and tell me about it. Good evening, Mr. Marten."

She retreated into the office, angrily conscious of strange happenings. Why should her mind go wandering through the rain? Why should it give signs and tokens of wanderings over the winter seas? When would she be able to grip it tight and stop it from wandering further? She passed her hand across her eyes and called herself a fool.

In a corner of the office, behind the desk, stood the dressing-case in its brown canvas cover. It had been dumped by a messenger one day after her departure

from the shop; the secretary had signed the man's receipt form. Except for the label bearing the name of the Southport firm who had sold the bag, and the imprint of the manufacturers, there had been nothing to tell her whence it came. She wrote to Southport. The firm replied that an unknown customer had purchased the case and given instructions as to delivery; and, as he had paid in cash and not by cheque, it was impossible to trace him. She had exhausted herself in futile conjectures as to the donor. There was not an acquaintance, male or female, between whom and Southport she could find any connecting link. Atherton never even flitted across the background of her thoughts. The dressing-case had remained a mystery.

Mr. Pilkington, consulted, said darkly:

"It may possibly be a try-on. Such things happen in business. I wouldn't touch it if I were you."

So Diana hadn't touched it, although the feminine and the lover of beauty within her were grievously tempted.

And now . . . now she realized it had come from Atherton, the new, incomprehensible incarnation of an Atherton of the past.

On two previous occasions Atherton had made her a present; once a Louis XV snuffbox, once a modest vanity-case (chosen by Muriel); and each gift had been accompanied by a visiting card, on which he had stiffly written: "For Diana Merrow, with kindest regards." His niggard instincts and his cold formality, which Muriel accepted humbly as eternal elements in his nature, like the mist and mud in outside nature, had ever goaded her to fury. Silly love for her helpless sister had compelled loyalty. But between Atherton and herself there had always existed an armed neutrality; at times broken, on her side, by winged taunts, arrows of scorn.

And until that meeting in the lounge of the Plaza-Athénée in Paris, her barbs had fallen blunted against the impenetrable armour of his conscious superiority. In Paris she had found, to her surprise, then to her amusement, a changed man. She had misjudged him all the time. Treat him humanly and he became human; charmingly, frankly human when he forgot himself. But there were times when he seemed to remember and to put on the whole armour of self-righteousness; and then she hated him again.

She must get out of the shop. She must be alone by a fireside, with the comforts and intimacies of her life around her, and think. At any rate she must escape from any smug fool who might come and bore her with arguments over these dead and dreadful contraptions of wood wherewith she was surrounded, and which, in her present nervous state, threatened to become a nightmare.

"Thank God," she breathed, as the taxi stopped at the door of her Mansions and the hall-porter crossed the wet pavement and took charge of the dressing-case.

The neat, smiling little maid welcomed her. Her name was Fanny Pratt. A great lion Pekingese, wide-boned, square-headed, spectacled like a mandarin, bow-legged in authoritative bone, draped in majestic furs and feathers, autocratic feathers two inches beyond his toes, his tail like a cascading oriflamme (for oriflamme see Macaulay's poem), his eyes like the dancing eyes of little Chinese devils, and his nose somehow prominently buried within his inner, but yet startling consciousness, welcomed her, too, with the fury of the Oriental who lets himself go. His name was Thunder.

She sat and received his first transport in her arms,

as he stuck his head under her chin uttering strange little noises. Then he lay back and, seraphically smiling, enjoyed the rubbing of his thick silky front and her foolish words of endearment. The ceremony over, he jumped to the ground, shook himself and stood gazing at her in inquiry, as who should say :

" Now, what have you been doing with this beastly day ? Tell me all about it."

And she looked at him rather tearfully and said :

" I'm afraid you wouldn't understand, old man. I'm none too clear about it myself."

The maid entered. " Will you have tea or a cocktail, miss ? "

Diana answered recklessly :

" Both."

Thunder had a pleasant meal.

The next day she interested herself in the Chino-Venetian corner-cupboard. Mr. Marten had not exaggerated its beauty and rarity. She bought it at a reasonable price. A week afterwards, knowing her market, she sold it at a very great profit.

Other opportunities for lucrative deals presented themselves in the weeks that followed, each attended by its excitement of suspense, its thrill of accomplishment ; so that it was only when she was alone with Thunder, and when, stretched supine, chin on feathery paws, he looked up at her half in mockery, half in sympathy out of his inscrutable eyes, that she allowed herself to think of the astonishing man whose disappearance had become a newspaper and social sensation.

Every one agreed that Sir Atherton Drake had not departed from England without leaving an address behind him, merely for the sake of his health. Every one seemed to know that inquiries as to his late move-

ments in the country, and his present whereabouts were being made by high official powers. Even Diana herself learned that. Bronson called at the shop one day in February. Although relieved of material cares through the agency of Mr. Edgar Fry, Sir Atherton's affairs caused him sleepless nights of anxiety. Only lately a Scotland Yard inspector had come and questioned him, the last man, he sighed, that could give any useful information. He had not set eyes on Sir Atherton since the middle of December. All communication between them had been made through Professor Gaffarelli, his new secretary. The inspector said they had reason to believe Sir Atherton and the Professor were in America. Bronson didn't know. How could he know? Should Miss Merrow ever hear from Sir Atherton, would she send him word—just a word saying that Sir Atherton was alive and well? More he could not ask, seeing that the police seemed to look to him for particular information. Diana promised, and dismissed a saddened Bronson with such comforting platitudes as lay in her power.

Then she learned that beneath rumour lay sinister and disturbing fact.

Early in March she received a post-card from New York. The address was typed. On the blank side there was nothing but a rough sketch of a mantelpiece on which was ranged a set of little monkeys. The only monkey-ridden mantelpiece she had ever beheld was that in Atherton's Paris hotel sitting-room.

She wired to Bronson to come and see her at the flat.

"I have news, Bronson," she said. "Sir Atherton is well. That's all I can tell you."

He expressed his thanks. But to give him news had not been the main reason for her summons. She bade him sit. Bronson knew his world. He sat on the

indicated chair and passed a reassuring hand over the head of a suspicious Thunder.

"This is between ourselves, Bronson, absolutely private and confidential," she said earnestly. "What I say to you, and what you say to me, doesn't go outside this room."

"That is so, miss."

She showed him the post-card drawing.

"Can you imagine Sir Atherton sending anyone such a message?"

He stared at it open-mouthed, and shook his head.

"Sir Atherton didn't send that."

"He did. I know of my own certain knowledge that he did."

"But Sir Atherton couldn't draw, miss. I know he couldn't!"

She paused at the man's emphatic statement. Atherton could draw. She remembered one evening in Paris when they had dined and gone to a theatre together. In the restaurant he had drawn on a pad, a *bloc-notes* borrowed from the *maître d'hôtel*, a vigorous caricature of a fat, bestial man sitting alone a few tables off. The same hand had dashed off the monkeys.

"But how do you know?" she asked insistently.

"I've often heard him say so to his friends. In fact, miss, it was a sort of pet grievance with him that he couldn't draw."

He went on giving instances recalled by his own memory from the long past of years. Childish attempts to set down his ideas graphically for the information of architects. An argument once at his dinner-table with some learned friend over a group of statuary. As far as Bronson could remember, the gentleman said the legs went one way, Sir Atherton said the other. Sir Atherton called for pencil and paper. He made a

few hopeless marks, then crumpled it up angrily with the exclamation, "Good God, if only I could draw!"

"Why, miss," said Bronson with a smile, "I've been with Sir Atherton since he was a tiny boy. I've known him better than his own father and mother. I remember that was one of the reasons, when they were both at school, that he was so jealous of his brother, poor Mr. Brotherton—and he so much more brilliant!—that Mr. Brotherton could draw and he couldn't."

Diana suddenly felt as though something had hit her somewhere, in some vital spot. She turned faint. She was conscious of growing white. Curious shivers crept up her brow and under her hair. She gripped the corded edges of the divan on which she sat. She seemed to be staring down into some wild psychological abyss. Vague fragments of modern scientific jargon picked up in casual reading hurtled through her distracted mind. Twin affinity. Sub-conscious change of identity. Psycho-analysis—a futile, meaningless word, worrying her brain.

She recovered herself with a great effort, and rose to put coals on the fire. Bronson sprang to his feet and respectfully took the scoop from her hand. Thus the draughtsmanship thread was broken as far, she hoped, as Bronson was concerned. She had learned far more than she had thought of learning. When they were reseated she asked him the question that originally was in her mind. Had Bronson noticed any great change of late in Sir Atherton's general conduct and character?

Said the perfect old servant who had passed his life in loyal service to the family of Drake:

"It's not for me, miss, to criticize Sir Atherton. But there have been changes; very curious changes.

One would say, almost, that he was a different man."

Diana nodded assent. "And what would you put the difference down to?"

"Possibly this trouble that he seemed to be in. He must have seen it coming for a long time. And then, miss, as I've been thinking it over, he never seemed to be the same man since poor Mr. Brotherton's death. There was no love lost between them, I know. But when Mr. Brotherton died on his hands, as it were, all sudden like, it gave Sir Atherton a great shock. He became softer, more human-like, if you know what I mean, miss."

"I think I know exactly what you mean, Bronson," said Diana.

"If I'm not taking too great a liberty, miss," Bronson went on, "I've always thought that something must have been said between the two brothers that laid its mark on Sir Atherton."

"How strange," said Diana. "And you can almost definitely date the change in Sir Atherton from the night of Mr. Brotherton's death?"

"Humanly speaking, I think I can," said Bronson.

"Well, there's nothing left but to see what happens," said Diana.

Bronson rose and thanked her for considerate kindness. Attached as he had been throughout all his adult life to Sir Atherton's person, he was bound to him by ties that had the strength of blood brotherhood. In the old Scottish clans there used to be some sort of ceremony with a dirk to establish such a relationship. In his respectful and unimaginative language he gave Diana to understand that there was a similar bond between him and Atherton.

"As for this disgrace that has fallen upon him, I can't understand it. I'd give every penny I have, miss, to know the truth."

Diana summoned a smile. "And I'd give a great deal too, Bronson."

For many days the two irreconcilable Athertons alternated before her vision in an inchoate phantasmagoria. She was tempted to consult some expert psychologist, putting before him a hypothetical case.

Could a man, already worn by anxiety and disease, suddenly, under the influence of sudden shock—the shock being the dramatic death under his eyes of a twin brother—change his character, almost basically change it; change radically from an artificial, cold, possibly cruel, none too moral Jekyll, into a careless, casual, and all too appealingly human Hyde?

Convention forbade so absurd an adventure. But that was her distracting problem. The worry of it, combined with what, woman-like, she thought might be a compensating balance of work, brought about a nervous breakdown. The work, however, had borne fruit in fortune. The weather was fit only for the fattest and greasiest of citizens, Arctic dogs and golf champions. Diana's doctor had bundled her off South to the sunshine.

Then she had arrived in Menton, a spent woman.

A spent woman she had gone to Monte Carlo to meet Horatio Flower, in the hope—proved vain—of getting from him the key to the mind-darkening imbroglio of which she was sure he held sole possession.

As she drove back to Menton, two key phrases of that talk between the two men, two that were one and the same, rang through her head. "The finest thing"—or whatever the exact words were—"I've ever done in my rotten life" . . . ". . . he acted like an honourable man, a very honourable man."

And she had had it in her power (she knew in the

maddened depths of her that she had had it in her power) that last night in January, had she only held him when he had thrown his arm about her, either in gift or surrender, to get at the whole heart of his mystery.

"Where have you been all this time?" asked Muriel when she reappeared at the Villa Seraphina.

"With Horatio, if you want to know. I think," she said, stamping her foot in nervous exasperation, "you're the damnedest little fool God ever allowed to crawl on the face of the earth."

Muriel approached her, in her mild, disarming way, with a queer little smile.

"I'm beginning to think so myself, darling."

CHAPTER XVIII

LADY DOLLY VALENTINE was a widow in her early fifties. She had three children, a son in the Indian Army, a son in the Navy, and a young daughter at school in England. She was fair, florid, and successful in keeping her figure within comely bounds, and, as far as her loneliness allowed, was a cheerful, happy and company-loving woman. Muriel and Diana, first cousins of her late husband, she had known from childhood and, to a certain extent, had mothered them. For their own mother, a woman of vehement passions, had deserted them when they were very young, leaving them to the law-ordained custody of a gentle and inefficient father, and, repenting fervently after the manner of mediæval ladies of her type, was expiating her sins in the eternal seclusion of a convent in Spain. She had chosen this country because her mother had been pure Spanish.

The only heritage she had left her daughters was the touch of Spain in their blood which showed itself, in diverse ways, in their characters. The fire, said Lady Dolly, she had left to the younger Diana; the lack of control to Muriel, who had also inherited her father's mild scholarly distaste for over-exertion both of will and bodily muscle. He had been a man of independent means and of a status in the literary world assured by his editorship for many years of a learned monthly journal.

Thus had he come into touch with the brilliant

young scholar, Atherton Drake. As a consequence of their intellectual friendship he had accepted a week-end invitation to Newstead Park, Sir Atherton Drake's newly acquired country residence, and had taken with him his elder and favourite daughter, Muriel, who to some extent shared his literary tastes and acted, on occasion, as his secretary. It was at a small, formal dinner-party given in their honour to such neighbours as Atherton was bound, some time or other, to entertain, that Muriel first met Horatio Flower. The latter fell in love with her dark, languid beauty and, before a couple of months were up, she found herself carried off her feet and married to him and enthroned as mistress in the New Forest home of this honest, not very intellectual, stag-hunting county gentleman.

Then Mr. Merrow had died, passing away as gently and as unobtrusively as he had lived.

Diana lived with a woman friend, had a disastrous girlish love affair with an unpleasant man about town, by the name of Guy Rickham who eventually, by the dotting of i's and the crossing of t's, made it clear to her ingenuous mind that of all propositions he could suggest for their immediate or future happiness marriage was the most absurdly impossible, and then, after a period of deeply resented heartache, fiercely convinced herself that men were deceivers ever, and that she, for her part, would never more have anything to do with any of them.

And then, like some sort of fungoid growth, according to her mind, had sprouted and developed this unholy intimacy between Muriel and her neighbour, Sir Atherton Drake. To understand it she had to use her keen intelligence and suppress instinct. She disliked both men. Horatio Flower was a man of the same florid male type as Guy Rickham, who had set her young chastity flaming fiercely white. Atherton

was a dry, formal pedant; more or less the copy of her father, with all the sweet, foolish, human lovableness frozen out of him. She was aware that Horatio, guessing her antipathy, made few overtures of friendship. She was aware, too, that Atherton expressed in his exquisitely polite, cold manner his lack of interest in so full-blooded and non-intellectual a person as herself.

But she had a mad, silly love for Muriel. For as long as she could remember she had stood between Fate and Muriel's ineffectuality. She had protected her, although eighteen months her junior, in a million trivial ways; in the million trivialities that have no place in a man's boyish life, but loom so important in girlish childhood and early womanhood. Trivial things such as:

"Darling, my new pink slippers. Somebody spilt something over them. They're ruined."

"Rot. It'll all come out with Oidono."

"But how do you put it on, darling?"

And "darling," impatient, practical, efficient, puts it on after the expenditure of much thought and care, and throws the slippers on to the bed of the helplessly expectant little nymph.

Or again, a garden party:

"Darling, he's coming to meet me behind the rhododendrons."

"I wouldn't be seen dead with the pie-faced little fool."

"Oh, darling, do be kind. He's so nice. Just keep *cave* for five minutes. His mother's a terror. A perfect Gorgon. Darling—do."

And Diana stands in hiding, her eyes upon the Gorgon mother, while fifteen-year-old Muriel lures her pie-faced coeval into barren osculation, until at her cry of "Miaow!"—the prearranged signal—the guilty

pair separate and melt into the landscape, and the garden party proceeds in its austere, elderly way.

Or again, very much later, very much more important: the night before Muriel's wedding, she was sitting on the edge of Muriel's bed. Muriel, with her oval Madonna face and appealing Madonna eyes, had claimed her final help. And Diana had smothered her with kisses by way of extinguishing inextinguishable laughter which rioted through her heart and brain.

"You're the most impossible child! How could you think of such a thing?"

There seemed, all their lives, to be no conceivable situation, however delicate, in which Muriel had not turned to her for guidance and support.

Since Diana's arrival in Menton the three women, sometimes in conclave, sometimes in combinations of pairs, had discussed Muriel's predicament. They met that afternoon, when Diana brought the report of her interview with Horatio, in full conclave.

The three tall French windows leading on to the terrace that commanded a westward view over the Bay were closed against the chill, post-sunset air. The glow of the sunset still lingered and crept, dark rose and gold, into the great drawing-room and touched the silver on the abandoned tea-table. At the far end of the room a wood fire burned cheerfully. The end of March in the South of France is not flaming midsummer. It is cold of evenings, and the cosiness of warmth is grateful.

Midway, in the centre of the room, sat the conclave. Muriel, with the air of a patient surrendering her case to eminent specialists, reclined on a couch listening, and with great mournful eyes regarding each of the two other women in turn as they spoke. Now that

health in its physical perfection had returned to her, she was a beautiful woman and, in her sinuous and almost declaratory feminine way, a woman attractive to the majority of men. Yet her face was one not of common allurement; there was intellectuality in the broad brows and the wide set of the eyes, and spirituality in the delicate contour of cheeks and chin. She made much of this refinement of feature. In itself it proclaimed distaste for coarser fibres in humanity such as those which were paramount in her husband's nature. She had declared many times to Diana:

"Horatio loves me for my body; Atherton for my mind."

She did not now, however, put forward this proposition to her two companions who were sitting close by. But Diana referred to it.

"When you used to talk about the grosser element in Horatio's love for you, I used to believe it, like a fool. Now I don't. I've changed my mind about him altogether."

"I think," said Lady Dolly, in her comfortable, matter-of-fact way, "you've got a chance which is given to one woman in a million. You kicked over the traces. You managed to keep clear—God knows how—of any very blatant scandal. You've got rid of a scoundrel. Apart from his having to fly the country with the police after him, didn't he do as mean a thing as a man could do, go and beg your husband to let him off the divorce proceedings? And with all that, now you have a real fine fellow like Horatio dying to take you back—no questions asked. What about it?"

Muriel sighed. "You're both beautifully right. I confessed a little while ago to Diana that I'd been a fool."

"And I can tell him," asked Diana, "that he can come and see you any time he likes?"

"Yes," said Muriel with a faint flush. "I think now I'd like to see him."

"That's sense at last," said Diana, lighting a cigarette.

"You'll have to be on your guard, my dear," said Lady Dolly, "lest Atherton pops up again. Not now—but in two years, five years, ten years' time."

Muriel swung her legs from the sofa and sat up. She bent forward, her palms on the seat each side of her.

"He'll never do that. There's no longer any Atherton—at any rate the man I used to know. I'll tell you two something I've never told you before, because you might think I was going mad. I believe Atherton's dead—or disappeared—months ago. Before I was taken ill in Paris."

Diana felt the same cold grip close round her as she had felt but a little while before, during her talk with Bronson. She was glad of the deepening twilight. She tried to steady her voice.

"What do you mean?"

Muriel bent forward and held out an arresting finger.

"The man who came to see me in the nursing-home in Paris wasn't Atherton."

Lady Dolly broke into a short laugh.

"Who was it, then?"

"How do I know?"

"Why didn't you say so at once?"

"I was so ill and weak that I took it for granted it was he. But he struck me as strange—his way of speaking. Oh, it took me a long time, weeks, putting all sorts of things together, to get the awful idea fixed in my head. Things he had said to me. 'Let it go at that,' I remember. Atherton never talked slangily.

Then, when he left me, he bent down and kissed me on the cheek. At the time I was so pleased. Afterwards I felt sure that Atherton couldn't have done such a thing. He had a horror of sick people. I remembered that once I came from the dentist's, feeling a bit done up and miserable—possibly with a trace of some antiseptic about me. He wouldn't let me go near him—grew white and faint and had to take drops."

She paused. Diana cried in a queer voice:

"Go on. Tell us more. You must have deeper reasons. There's a difference between a live woman smelling of creosote and a woman just snatched out of the jaws of death."

"He didn't look the same, darling. I can't explain. And then, his hand was so firm and strong."

"Good God!" cried Diana, starting up. "What a fool I've been! Atherton's hands were cold and clammy. This man's were dry and strong."

She turned to Muriel with an apparently irrelevant question which she had to repeat. Could Atherton draw? Could he sketch? Muriel shook an uncomprehending head. No. In her own way she confirmed Bronson's story. Diana exclaimed rather wildly:

"The child's right. It all hangs together. It isn't that Atherton's changed. The man isn't Atherton at all. He's somebody else. His double."

Lady Dolly rose and looked from one to the other of the two drawn faces.

"Are the pair of you going crazy? What's it all about? For God's sake talk sense, one of you." She crossed the room and switched on the light. Muriel made a quick move of protest. "I don't care whether you like it or not. At any rate we can see each other in the clear light of reason. How could Atherton have a double?"

"Atherton," said Diana, very pale, giddily conscious of being on the verge of the incredible, "had a twin brother who died in the flat. His death was reported in *The Times*. We all saw it. Bronson told me that when they were young they were almost indistinguishable. And he told me that the dead man, Brotherton Drake, might have been Atherton himself. And," she said slowly, after a slight pause, "the change in Atherton dates from the night of his brother's death."

Cold wings seemed to beat through the great room above the heads of the three women.

"But what are we to make of it all?" asked Lady Dolly.

"God knows," said Diana. "God, and Horatio Flower."

"Horatio!" cried Muriel.

"Of course. Didn't he tell me that Atherton—or the man we call Atherton—acted in a noble, honourable, to listen to him one would gather it was a fantastically quixotic, way, when he saw him in Hampshire?"

"But who is the man masquerading as Atherton Drake?"

"His twin, Brotherton. How, I don't know. Lend me the car now, Dolly. I'll go over to Cannes."

"Why not telephone him to come here?" Muriel suggested, with characteristic indolence.

"Because it will take an hour or two to get him on the telephone, and a couple of hours more for him to get here. Quicker to go to Cannes and find him. That'll be simple."

Muriel drew herself up, very erect.

"If you go, I'll go with you."

"And I too," said Lady Dolly. "If I'm not with you, none of you will think of dinner."

Horatio was easily found. He had taken a small

furnished villa on the Californie for the season. Smith and a maid and a cook ministered to his comfort. The domesticated English country squire regards hotels more as the sporadic caravanserais of travel than as permanent resting-places. His honest instincts revolt against their spurious palatiality; and hostelries of a second order do not provide for many comfortable habits. Horatio was found at home, reading *The Times*.

He looked up from his paper as the purring of a car, the front door bell, a whispered colloquy in the hall, met his ear. He laid it down and sprang to his feet when Smith, with a scared face, announced his visitors.

"It's all right," he said, cutting short the man's excuses. "I saw Miss Merrow this morning."

He greeted them in the order in which they entered. There was a light in his eyes.

"My dear Dolly, what a pleasure to see you once more. Diana." He held out both hands to Muriel. "My dear, where will you sit?" He led her to an arm-chair. "You're well again? You're looking so. Thanks to you, Dolly."

He placed chairs for the other two women, apologizing for their discomfort. The luxuries of the appurtenances of little French villas furnished for letting purposes were calculated to a nicety. The French were an exact people. He laughed and his face lit up. Diana reproached herself bitterly for the foolish things she had thought and said about him. How a woman could have left him for the old, unspeakable Atherton, she was at a loss to comprehend.

"I suppose you're dying to know why we're all here," she said in her frank way.

"I was hoping it was a result of our talk to-day. Is it, Muriel?"

She flushed. "Perhaps. Diana has told me all you said."

"Then, my dear,"—he made an involuntary step towards her—"you consent?"

"That's not the question for the moment, Horatio," said Lady Dolly. "If you and Muriel want to talk things over, you must do it by yourselves. Diana and I don't want to listen to you. There's some decency left in modern life."

"We've come—or rather, I've come and brought Dolly and Muriel—to clear the ground once and for all. It's not a pleasant subject, I know. But we've got to talk of Atherton first."

He stiffened. "I see no reason. He has disappeared from our lives. That's quite enough. Not only from our lives—but—er—generally."

"He's dead," said Diana. "And you know it."

"Dead? When?" he asked, startled, his mind following the actual man that had vanished.

"He died before the man, his twin brother, came to see you."

He passed his hands over his eyes, somewhat staggered. He looked at her, deep lines across his forehead.

"How do you know that? If you knew, why didn't you tell me this morning?"

"I wasn't sure then. I tried to get it out of you. But you were lying low and saying nothing. You had given him your sacred promise, I suppose, to say nothing. Oh, I'm not being sarcastic," she cried, as he made an impatient gesture. "I'm stating a fact. I'm not a fool—not now, at any rate. Well, I wasn't sure this morning; but I was sure when I talked this afternoon to Muriel. The man she saw in Paris wasn't Atherton. She realizes it. Then I *was* sure." She rose and took him by the lapels of his coat. "You

see, your knowledge is common property. You're released from your promise. Aren't you ? "

He looked down on her from his burly height.

" I suppose I am," he admitted.

" Atherton's dead, isn't he ? "

" Yes."

" And the man you saw is his twin, Brotherton ? "

" Yes."

Muriel rose to her feet with a curious sinuous softness.

" All this has been worrying me for months," she said, facing him. " If you don't make everything absolutely clear now, I'd better go home."

" And if I do ? "

" Then we can talk things over—by ourselves—as Dolly suggested."

" Very well. But for God's sake sit down, both of you." And when they had done so, he began : " Well. It was like this . . ." And he told the preposterous story to the three staring and silent women.

" But what induced him to go to you, in the first place ? " asked Lady Dolly.

" He saw me in the road, breaking in a beast of a colt. Fond of horses and that sort of thing. Liked the look of me—so came and made a clean breast of it. That's why I told you he acted honourably. He's a damned fine fellow, is Brotherton Drake. Sort of man one loves at first sight. I did—at least, after he had nearly broken my arm and proved to me who he was."

Muriel sighed. " But why—why didn't he come and tell me ? "

" Ask him, my dear," said Horatio. " He was going about under the peril of penal servitude and you had no particular reason to be kind and tender to him if you knew. You wouldn't have been, would you ? "

"I might, and then again I mightn't. How is one to know?"

"Well, that's honest, at any rate," said Lady Dolly, rising. "There's one point we must clear up before we go. Is it the real Atherton, or the bogus Atherton, the new one, that is wanted by the police for the mysterious offences?"

"The dead Atherton," said Horatio gravely.

Diana drew him away with "Just a minute" by way of apology to the others.

"You're sure it's penal servitude for him if he's caught?"

"As Atherton?"

"No. As himself. Brotherton. Buddy Drake, as he told you every one calls him."

"Yes, I'm sure. I liked the chap so much that I've made it my business to find out. I know a criminal advocate or two at my club, and Carthew—the judge, you know—is an old friend of my father. Of course in consulting them I didn't give anything or anybody away. But that's that. He can't get away from it."

"Thanks," she said. "Thanks for telling me."

His ear was conscious of a lack of tone in her voice, and he saw averted from him a miserable young face, eyes looking hopelessly into the distance, and young lips being bitten to control their quivering. He bent down, very kindly, and said in a half-whisper:

"I'm sorry, dear. I didn't know. But, all said and done, he's a damn good fellow. I'd stake my life on it. And any mortal thing that I can do—well, you've only got to ask me."

She flashed up at him. "You're a dear. Oh, God! what a pack of colossal fools we've been."

She broke away.

"Dolly, I'm famished. We must go and get food somehow. We'll leave Horatio to feed Muriel."

"There is sure to be dinner here for everybody," said Horatio.

"Then there'll be enough for Muriel. We'll go, and we can pick up Muriel after your talk."

Muriel said in a timid, indecisive way:

"Don't you think we might all dine together?"

"No, I don't," declared Lady Dolly. "Diana has quite enough of her own concerns to worry about. We'll get food at any old place, and when we've finished we'll drive back to Menton."

"But how shall I get back?" asked Muriel with great eyes of alarm.

"I'll see to that, my dear," said Horatio. "I have the Daimler with me. It is still great, and Fenwick continues to be its prophet."

Diana and Lady Dolly drove away and dined in a discreet corner of the Carlton; at least Lady Dolly dined, having little but the sorrows of others (which do not take away the appetite) to affect her digestion. Diana had no heart for food. Her heart, for perhaps the first time in her life, craved human sympathy. It found as much as it clamoured for in the kindly woman who gave generously. Well, you see, there was John in India, Charles somewhere in the Pacific, May (aged 15) at school in Leatherhead. There were bound to be convulsions, all sorts of devils to pay in the three young lives. She had a Faith, far transcending her belief in God, that in the convulsions and earthquakes and upheavals, the three fibres of herself issuant from her body, part and parcel of her spirit, would come to her—just come to her. She could never get further than that. They would, in the sacred nature of things, come to her for understanding, warmth, solace. Guidance? No. She put that, as an intellectual concept, away from her. Only fools needed guidance; and then they forgot and lost their

way. The intelligent, like her three children, would, in the nature of human beings with brains of their own, resent personally conducted tours through life. They would require and consume greedily, sympathies far too subtle for definition. They hadn't required anything yet. They were far too young and unaware. But a day would surely come. Meanwhile—and by no means the first—here was Diana, a subject to practise on.

In the car going back to Menton, Diana threw her arms around her.

"You're the dearest of all possible dears."

Lady Dolly kissed her in the darkness, somewhere between eyebrow and cheek-bone.

"Just sense, my child. Have sense."

When they entered the villa a sleepy manservant began mechanically to bolt the front door.

"Tell him to stop," said Diana. "There's Muriel."

"If she comes back, she can sleep in the garage," said Lady Dolly.

Muriel didn't come back.

CHAPTER XIX

IF ever man was between the devil and the deep sea, that man was Buddy Drake. Such was the insistent thought of Diana in dreary trains, in dreary hotels of little towns, in dreary back parlours of antique shops, in drearier semi-furnished or craftily sham-furnished palazzi, during her annual collecting tour in Northern Italy. Hitherto she had thrown her heart into the business whose elements, none too simple, she had mastered ; for it demanded the fighting qualities of cynical caution, subtlety and dash, and it offered as reward the thrill of victory. She used to have the exultant feeling that dealers and noble owners of palaces who reluctantly sold their heirlooms were afraid of her. Her exultation was based on fact, for she went about like a dark flame.

That lovely, heavy walnut table with great winged lions each facing corner-wise on the legs—

"A beautiful piece, Signorina. Genuine Venetian, early sixteenth century."

"My poor friend, how they have cheated you!" She would play with her fingers among the slant mouldings. "Paris Exhibition of 1870-something. Possibly second prize. No, no. But that re-table over there?"

"That—ah!—it is worth whatever an amateur will pay for it. I sold one not so good as this to a Brazilian two days ago for one hundred and fifty thousand lire."

"It's good. It's all right. I'll give you five thousand. Unless you find another idiot from Brazil you'll have it cluttering up the wall, at a dead loss, for the next twenty years."

"And you, Signorina, if I let it go for five thousand lire, for how much will you sell it in London—unless to another idiot from Brazil?"

"I buy it solely as an advertisement for you, Signor Morelli."

And there would be laughter and head-shaking over a deal concluded satisfactorily to both sides.

But now this joy of bartering had gone. Her business became nothing but a sordid struggle with blatant thieves and specious rogues. She hated the whole lot of them. Her purchases were guided by a mere intellectual routine. At the back of her mind, at the back of her thoughts, at the back of her subconsciousness, as she slept, was Buddy Drake between the devil and the deep sea.

In either character, Atherton or Brotherton, his personal liberty was imperilled. As Atherton, for committing vaguely rumoured political offences; as Brotherton for impersonating the dead Atherton. Under which style was he passing in America? If as Atherton, what was his position?

On her return to London she sounded an old friend of hers, Sir Hugo Bellamy, M.P. He was an old member, encrusted like a barnacle on the House of Commons, and the wash of gossip of all the lobbies and all the committees in the vast building surmounted by the Clock Tower was music in his ears. He knew the inner secrets of all the Government Departments. He professed to scoff at Questions. He himself could have answered them off-hand. He called his political opponents by their Christian names and spoke of their policy with cynical tolerance. Many people wondered

why he had never held office and why thirty long years of Parliamentary service had been rewarded only by a knighthood ; but they were folks who naturally could not see men and things through the eyes of a Prime Minister. Anyhow, there Sir Hugo Bellamy remained, secure in an impregnable Tory seat, burly, resonant and super-knowledgeable.

" Atherton Drake ! Let's see, a neighbour of yours, or rather, your sister's, in the New Forest "—he knew everything—" a brilliant chap. No success in the House. Couldn't speak, as we understand speaking nowadays. Thin, subtle, pedantic, caustic. Over-brilliant. One of those men with brains too fierce for their minds. Oh, yes, my dear, he's come a mucker, an awful mucker, for that very reason. Thought he could outwit everybody and lost his sense of values. That's the most charitable way to put it. Of course he had to clear out."

" But why ? " Diana insisted. She was his neighbour at dinner.

" Let us say that he incurred the displeasure of the Foreign Office. If he had remained in the country they would have had to take action, and there would have been the very devil of a scandal. So the F.O., who, after all, have nothing to gain by stirring up mud, let him make his get-away. They dropped him a hint. In such cases they often do."

" But supposing the Foreign Office or the police want to get him, after all ? "

" Suppose they did. If he's in a foreign country how can they ? Political offences are outside international extradition agreements."

" But he can't set foot on British soil ever again ? " she asked.

" Of course not. Are you sorry ? "

She drew a sharp breath at the casual question.

They were discussing Atherton. How could she regret his exile? But the pariahdom of Buddy was a different matter.

"I want to know the position. That's all. You see, one hasn't many first-class crooks among one's personal acquaintances."

Sir Hugo, a dark, heavily built man, laughed.

"You're right. Perhaps he was one of the most remarkable men who ever skimmed over your life. Here was a man born to intellectual glory who sold everything—intellect, honour, peace of mind—for money. Do you know, he was the next man to be elected to the Royal British Academy."

"What on earth is that?" asked Diana.

"It's the museum of the pure intellect of the country."

"What does it do?"

"It occupies rooms in Burlington House and admires itself."

"Thank goodness I've never heard of it!" said Diana.

That marked the end of the talk as far as Atherton Drake was concerned. She had learned more or less what she wanted to know.

Muriel gave her the name and address of Atherton's lawyers. She contrived an interview with Edgar Fry—pink, bald and benevolent. He received her with paternal courtesy, as Mrs. Flower's sister. The divorce suit. Ah, yes. A thousand pities it was ever brought. Thank Heaven it was stopped in time. And now Mrs. Flower had rejoined her husband and was perfectly happy? He was so glad. Now and again one caught a little ray of perfection in an imperfect world. How could he be of service to Miss Merrow?

"It's this," said Diana. "It's vitally important I should get into touch with Sir Atherton—nothing to

do with my sister, or the general fuss there seems to be about him—something quite private and apart. Can you give me, in confidence, his address ? "

He smiled and raised a plump, smooth hand.

" I'm afraid not."

" Don't you know it yourself ? "

" That's a question I mustn't answer, Miss Merrow."

" Would you forward him a letter from me ? "

" No."

" That seems rather unreasonable, Mr. Fry." She paused for a moment. " If you like I could leave it open, so that you could read it."

Mr. Fry expressed regret that no letters of any kind could be forwarded to Sir Atherton. He rang for a clerk, crossed the room and joined the young man on the threshold and gave him a whispered order. The clerk presently appeared with a great tape-bound bundle of correspondence.

" You see, Miss Merrow, there's nothing personal in my refusal."

" I'm sure you don't know where he is," said Diana.

He regarded her like a genial sphinx, with just a fine network of anxious lines on his otherwise smooth brow.

" You may or may not be aware," said he, " that Sir Atherton's position—to say nothing of ours, his confidential advisers—is peculiarly delicate. You must therefore forgive my apparent discourtesy in sending you away without giving you any information."

He rose, signifying the end of the interview. She laughed as she shook hands.

" You've been perfectly charming, Mr. Fry. When I'm in difficulties I'll come straight to you. But you have given me one piece of information. You know less where he is than even I do. But I'm going to find him—and when I've found him I'll come and see

you again." She smiled radiantly in the passage, a pace away from the open door at which he stood. "And then I'll give you the surprise of your life."

This declaration was not dictated by any impulse of a triumphant moment. Diana was a young woman who had trained herself—perhaps in consequence of her unhappy affair with the Don Juanesque Guy Rickham—to control her impulses, treat them, however, with due respect, and take stock of them. And regarding Buddy she had taken stock of about a million and had registered them carefully, and found that they represented concentrated forces whose resultant was an irresistible purpose. Of this she had given but the flash of a hint to Mr. Fry.

If the man to whom she was so magnetically attracted could not set foot on British soil she, remaining on it, could not possibly meet him again; which was as logical a proposition as ever confronted woman. His curious message came from New York. In New York, or somewhere else in America, could he be found. Of course America was a vast continent; on first thoughts it appeared that a human unit wandering about it would be as untraceable as a particular grain of sand in the desert. But second thoughts enabled her to realize that the United States have very stringent immigration laws, that every incoming alien is a marked man; that Brotherton Drake could not be so far lost that the police couldn't find him. She had also heard that the American police, chiefly of Irish extraction, when they were not up against extra-notorious evildoers, but, on the other hand, dealing with innocent folk who appealed to them for help—especially folk who were tactful and personally attractive—were a very kindly race. She had also heard of the sound admixture of a smile and a hundred-dollar bill.

Brotherton Drake therefore was as good as found.

Being a woman, however, she took into account the considerations which greatly mitigated the crudity of her resolution. For a long time she had vaguely contemplated the possibility of extending the business of Merro, Ltd., to New York. Only recently had her trading account justified, in any slight degree, an ambition so fantastic. She had never done such a three-months' trade. Pilkington, the invaluable, with a nose like a Périgord dog, could scent from London a truffle of an exquisite Renaissance piece buried somewhere in Westmorland. He should soon, she decided, be rewarded with a partnership. When she broached the question of a business trip to America to spy out the land, he responded with enthusiasm. Had they not already several wealthy American customers on their books, people of educated judgment who knew exactly what they were buying? Beyond doubt they would promise her their support. The firm would be as successful in New York as in London. And why? Because no fake had ever been allowed to enter those doors, still less to go out from them.

"We are building up a reputation," he cried with a flush on his sallow cheeks, "as one of the straightest expert firms in London. Soon the fact of a piece having passed through Merro's will be a hall-mark both of genuineness and authenticity."

"Mr. Pilkington," said Diana, delighted, "if you think I can reasonably draw a couple of thousand pounds out of the business to play with in America, I'll take you into partnership this very day."

"If it's a question of partnership, Miss Merrow," said Pilkington, the flush spreading to his temples, "I'd be only too glad to make up the two thousand pounds myself."

So that was settled. She trod on air. How had she

been so unpercipient hitherto as not to catch the imperative summons to New York in the interests of Merro, Ltd.? She proclaimed to her friends:

"I'm going to America on business. The shop flourishing? I should think it is. I'm going to see about opening a branch in New York."

No one, not even Muriel or Lady Dolly, suspected the irresistible purpose at the back of this gay and enthusiastic activity.

And Buddy, expatriated and over closely shorn, had not the remotest idea how the wind was in process of being tempered to him through the obscure agency of a Mr. Pilkington.

Early in May she found herself on board the "Mauretania," proudest and most comfortable of ships. The liner carried out half the number of passengers that she would bring home. Diana felt that life, compounded as it was of pleasant human companionship, food eaten with the appetite of a primitive animal, golden air, faint soft breeze and quiet foam-laced indigo sea, was as gracious a condition of being as even angels would appreciate. Whence came the companions she scarcely troubled to inquire. With here and there a couple or a unit, male or female, she was linked by acquaintance with common friends. There were the conventionals. There were the casuals. The latter, chiefly male, were the more amusing. It never occurred to her—so occupied she was with purposes and responsibilities—as she lay in her deck-chair on the leeside of B deck pretending to read a novel, but all the time looking seawards out of her great dark eyes, the rich peach colour whipped into her olive cheeks by the Atlantic breeze, that to the young eyes —and even to the old eyes—of men, she was peculiarly beautiful and desirable. She did not trouble to think

of the hours of agonized deliberating that preceded the bashful approach of a modest youth. Some such she claimed of her own accord. She had a glorious sense of freedom which she knew how to temper with dignity. She ran a pretty riot of dancing and ball-playing and laughter.

On the third night out she auctioned the tickets for the run. She had a small triumph of joyous personality. An elderly American gentleman, a King of some commodity, came up to her afterwards as the smoking-room crowd thinned.

"You're a wonderful saleswoman," said he. "You could sell anything to anybody. Rosaries to a Methodist chapel, or Lido pyjamas to a nunnery. You ought to be in business."

"I am," laughed Diana. She dived into her bag and produced a crumpled photographic reproduction on glazed paper of a canopied Renaissance bed. "I'll sell you this straight away. It's in England, of course. It's genuine. It has a perfect pedigree. Queen Elizabeth didn't sleep in it, but Lord Essex did. Did you ever see anything so beautiful?" she asked, as he put on his horn-rimmed reading glasses to look at it. "Those bulbous posts, and the carving of the bedhead, and the moulding round the canopy, and the roof of the canopy is carved too. You can just see it in the photograph. Merro, Ltd., Sloane Street, London. That's me."

"How much are you asking for it?"

"Fifteen hundred guineas. For you I'd make it pounds."

He grinned. "Easier to work out into dollars."

"Of course you ought to have a house in which it can fit—or, at any rate, a room. I hate people to buy my things—I specialize in Renaissance, chiefly Italian, though this, of course, is English—and complain to me

afterwards that they don't look right with Empire stuff. Now, have you a room like that?"

"Not quite," he said. "But I could easily build one. I've a country-house on Long Island Sound and I've been thinking for some time of adding on a new wing to it. This bed's great."

"You get your architect," said Diana delightedly —they had drifted to a lounge seat by the wall— "to make a ground plan of the site. Put that bed in the middle and create something really perfect all round it."

"My wife and I," said the Some-Commodity King, with a twinkle in his eye, "have slept both in New York and on Long Island Sound in good solid American beds which we bought at Wanamakers thirty years ago."

"You weren't contemplating changing from your old comfortable quarters with your old comfortable bed into the New Wing, were you?"

"God forbid!" said the King.

"Well, then," asked Diana, "what's the New Wing for?"

He beckoned a steward, turned to her.

"My dear Miss Merrow, may I have the honour? What shall it be?"

He was a very courteous, florid, elderly gentleman, with a highly trimmed mass of white hair parted in the middle. His looks and manners were those of an Ambassador. She knew his name—John P. Stebbings. One legend had it that once he was a barkeeper in Keokuk; another that he was a bellboy in a Kansas City Hotel; another that he had married, *en premières noces*, the daughter of his employer who sold hamburgers and hot dogs down near the Stockyards in Chicago. Diana believed none of them. After all, what did it matter? He had dark blue eyes with a

twinkle in them—many twinkles, suggesting the lightning changes of some calculating machine, that was measuring her, appraising her, summing her up, in the most courteously humorous way in the world.

"You ask what the New Wing is for?" He looked across the smoking-room as though his eyes followed the ministering steward. "Sure, not for Mrs. Stebbings or myself. We have all we want. Now there are two outlooks granted to old people—the retrospective and the prospective. For me, what's gone is gone. Omar Khayyam said something about that, didn't he? So I like to look into the future. I've got a son. I'd like to leave him, when I die, a family homestead of which he and his descendants may be proud. But the question is whether he should start fresh with whatever our own civilization is evolving as beautiful, or whether he should start with a faked past. I don't mean to say your bed is a fake."

"Of course not," said Diana. "I see what you mean. You might fill the room with genuine bits, but you'd have to fake the walls and roof and windows —in fact, the atmosphere. You're quite right. From your special point of view the first alternative is the honest one. I'm afraid I haven't sold you the bed, Mr. Stebbings, for all my salesmanship."

"Perhaps you haven't." He smiled with shrewd kindness. "But you've given me something much better—your understanding and sympathy."

When she had left him, after shaking hands, she felt she had made a friend whose interest in her business welfare might be more valuable than the profit she reckoned to make out of the sale of the bed. As a matter of fact, the bed was still unsold by its owner, in an old country-house in Herefordshire. She had only an option. If she sold before the option expired,

she would be on velvet. If she didn't, she would be where she was. She went to bed and slept soundly.

Before they landed she had one or two talks with the wise and paternal Stebbings. He said once :

"You'll get on. You've got the English qualities that we try to laugh at and all the time secretly admire. You have force, but you don't waste it, and you know how to apply it. You can talk without using a megaphone and you're heard much more clearly. Wasn't it Fielding—I think it's the opening of 'Amelia'—who said that Life is as much of an Art as a statue or a noble poem? That's a conception the New World hasn't aimed at yet. If we did we'd have learned the law of restraint, which is one of the great canons of all Art. But we conceive life as a business. We blindly follow the eternal canon—but it takes the form of bluff. I've done it myself a hundred thousand times. But it's none the less vulgar and blatant. What I want to get at is this : when you of the Old World get there through restraint, under-statement, appeal to the imagination—of course a lightning stroke of an appeal—then we admire you and take you to our hearts. We don't tell you why. We're not giving ourselves away. But we're a fundamentally sentimental people, and deep down in our souls we have the unformulated conviction that life is really an art and not a business."

Here was a man who, practically unaided, had amassed an enormous fortune in the manufacture of cheap block tins and pans for kitchen use quoting Fielding and dealing happily with the formulæ of æsthetics ; a representative business American millionaire, who slept in an old-fashioned hideosity of a Wanamaker bed, seeing life steadily and seeing it whole, and going out of his way to commend her for qualities apparently absurd in his business world.

She was alive to the subtlety of the personal compliment; a tribute to the ridiculous old inherited inhibitions of gentle breeding—to the silly formula by which the lives of herself and her English world were governed; there were things one could do and things which one couldn't. She remembered discussing, with a distinguished foreign member of a polo team, the rough play of a member of the opposing team, and his replying:

"You either play polo like a gentleman or you don't play it like a gentleman. And there is no difference."

And he had been illuminatingly right. You could either play the game or practise the art of life like this or like that. There was no difference. But there was a spiritual distinction of infinite significance.

She thought of Buddy Drake and her real errand; the chase of this wild goose of a man whom she couldn't dissociate from an ache running through the fibres of her being and now and then, but for impatient act of will, threatening to become an idiotic torment. Suppose she found him, claimed him? What would he be like? What had been his past life? She knew nothing beyond what Horatio had told her of his confession. The foreign polo player's aphorism disturbed her. The memory of it had been evolved by old John P. Stebbings, the Tin Pan King. There was an inward invisible grace in old John P. Stebbings.

They steamed into New York Harbour on a day of May sunshine and pure clarity of air. The individual buildings of the weird jagged skyline stood out sharp white against the blue, their thousand tips gold and pink and violet as they were caught by the afternoon sun. Ferry boats and tugs drifted fairy-like, in one inextricable maze of dragonflies certain of their course, over the calm and happy waters. Away, along the

endless row of docks, the funnels and half-seen hulls of great ships proclaimed the mightiness of man and his triumphant conquest of Nature. The dock into which the nose of the "Mauretania" pointed was a mass, tier after tier, of bright, light colour, a strange pink preponderating, that of human faces.

As the ship drew near, the mass disintegrated itself into clean-cut human entities. There was flutter of handkerchiefs, waving of hats. Mr. Stebbings, by Diana's side, waved his hat vehemently. He clutched her arm.

"Mrs. Stebbings and my daughter. There—you see them?"

In spite of her excitement in approaching this strange and wonderful land, her heart was heavy. There was not a soul on those tiers of dock to wave hat or handkerchief to her, or blow her foolish kisses. She had, as a matter of business, written from Merro, Ltd., to her American customers announcing her visit. She had also cabled her school friend, Maisie Heywood, whose husband was on the staff of the British Embassy at Washington. But the chance of Maisie being on the pier to welcome her was remote. If only Buddy Drake had received her telepathic messages and was there awaiting her, how her heart, relieved of its heaviness, would have leaped riotously when she caught sight of him; but before all this conglomerate mass of human friendship and love which seemed to take her to its heart, but which she knew, forlornly, unit by unit, would pass her by as though she had no existence, her spirits sank.

A depressed and chastened Diana went on the gangway, and, following instructions, found the letter M where she must wait for her luggage in the vast, awful, dingy, comfortless sheds of the New York Custom House. M is a bad and crowded initial. The Macs

alone take up a lot of it. The dreadful recessed pen was thronged. No flat surface of any kind offered a seat. Placards all over the place prohibited the poor comfort of a cigarette. There was no air on that warm May afternoon in the infernal shed.

One or two articles of her luggage had already been dumped on the counter. She went to the edge of the pen to claim the rest and direct its placing, and there she met Mr. Stebbings with wife and daughter. He was through, having but a man's insignificant impedimenta, and also the courtesy of the port. Introductions were made. The daughter was as smart as the Rue de la Paix. The mother was the typical American mother : waxen-faced, plump, white-handed, wearing the queer, tall, soft, black felt hat, like a misshapen flower-pot, which for some inscrutable reason America has prescribed for all her respectable womenfolk over the age of fifty.

In less than a quarter of an hour the Stebbings family had seen her through the Customs and into a taxi, and she drove away through the clattering streets with a grateful heart for pure kindness shown to a stranger within American gates and a promise given to spend the week-end at the Stebbings' home on Long Island Sound.

CHAPTER XX

FOR the first month of Diana's stay in New York nothing very much happened. Between the cold American business brain and the warm American personal heart there is the most yawning of all abysses. Through the Stebbings and Maisie Heywood, who came from Washington to see her, and through a casual acquaintance here and there, she soon formed a pleasant circle of friends. Socially she was successful. In business she had to confess to failure. Her old clients were kind and wished her well; which was not very substantial. Her fellow-tradesmen in the antique to whom she had brought introductions, or introduced herself, received her civilly, but showed plainly that they wished her evil; which was substantial enough, but very depressing. She found among the latter an acceptance of trade customs which would find no place in her possibly uncommercial system of ethics. The ostensible reason therefore of her American trip began to melt away into nothingness. She began to wonder what she should say to Pilkington. So much, however, for Merro, Ltd.

For Diana Merrow, in search of the strange human being to whom, with or without reason, she had given her love, there was very little more to be said. Friends and furniture-dealers passed before her eyes like shadows, pleasant and unpleasant. Behind the shadows lay the reality of purpose. She explored

every kind of avenue possible to woman. She had but one success. She went round the shipping companies, with the same question accompanied by the same smile, arresting and captivating to polite young clerks. Had they on their sailing lists, westward bound, end of January, early February, anyone by the name of Drake? They referred to files. They showed her the typewritten lists of first-class passengers. There were nine or ten Drakes, none of which could be her Drake. It didn't occur to her that Buddy could travel otherwise than under his disastrously usurped name. The idiot formalities involved in her own passport convinced her that he must have sailed as Atherton. He might have dropped the title. Anyhow, there was not even an " A. Drake " on the first-class passenger lists.

Then one evening, a rare evening of New York summer rain that beat hard against the panes of her eighteenth-story window, the last picture of Buddy coming into the Sloane Street shop, hunted, dripping with rain, and going out again into the raining night, flashed across her brain with a new significance. She felt that she could kick herself for a fool. The lingering glamour of Sir Atherton Drake had blinded her to the fact that Buddy, fugitive from justice, would not travel in the blaze of first-class publicity. She started on her road again. First the Cunard Line, then the White Star.

Then she got hold of him. The " Homeric," Third Class; a Brotherton Drake arrived New York the fourth of February.

But had she got very much further? She knew from his post card that he was in New York. Well, she had advanced a step. He had discarded the Atherton and assumed the reincarnation of his dead self. It was obvious that he had used his old pass-

port. What busy official could record on his brain the bald announcement in *The Times*, months ago of the death of an obscure Brotherton Drake? Flight had been easy; facilitated, as her omniscient friend, Sir Hugo Bellamy, had suggested, by the discreetly blinded eye of the Foreign Office.

Here he was, at any rate, either in New York or somewhere in the United States, going about under his own name. After this knowledge she breathed more freely. He had cast off Atherton and his evil works. She was relieved, in her search, of the Atherton incubus. Plainer sailing lay before her.

But here she was, too: a stray young woman in New York, unknown, save to her few acquaintances, very much alone and, when she thought deeply of her quest, exasperatingly helpless. To a human being in her quandary there was only one thing that could be dictated by common sense. She consulted an eminent firm of attorneys, recommended by Mr. Stebbings, who in their turn recommended and drew up an agreement protecting her financial responsibilities with another organization.

The result was a visit one morning from Mr. Nicholas Pyne. He was a youngish, fat little man of dark complexion, inconspicuous attire and agreeable manners.

"Miss Merrow," he said, "as you see by my card, I represent the Runok Private Investigation Agency, and you were so kind as to make this appointment. In what way can I be of service to you?"

She motioned him to a chair in her small hotel sitting-room, offered him a cigarette from a box on a table, and took one herself. She noted his punctiliousness in springing forward with a rapidly dived for patent-lighter. He had a pleasant smile. He suggested rather the knowledgeable young man who

found your books in a public library than a private detective. Diana had never met a private detective in her life.

"Well," he said, "you must take me into your confidence, Miss Merrow. With us, of course, it's not only a question of professional secrecy, but practically the secrecy of the confessional. Otherwise firms like ours would be out of business in a week."

He took out a notebook and pencil. Diana felt rather foolish.

"I want to find a man."

"A man," said Mr. Pyne politely. "What kind of man?"

She laughed and outlined her quest. A third-class passenger, named Brotherton Drake, had landed early in February from the White Star liner "Homeric." He had left America last October, after a residence of nearly ten years, during which time she believed he had been an actor in touring companies all over the United States. An Englishman? Yes. Age? Appearance? She replied to the best of her abilities. Could she give him any references—dates, places—concerning Mr. Brotherton Drake's movements during his ten years' stay?

She couldn't. More than ever before did the past life of Buddy come before her as a bank of mist and mystery. All she knew was Horatio Flower's report of Buddy's apology for his life.

"It's a pity," said Nicholas Pyne. "Every dry fact we can get hold of is important."

"But I suppose," said Diana, "in your profession you couldn't deal with any old number of dry facts without some imagination."

"That's so," he replied politely. "Our fees largely depend on our constructive imagination. The more facts we have, the easier the deduction, and the

quicker the case is over. Which means less fees to the client."

"That's all I can tell you, then," said Diana.

"Not quite all," said Mr. Pyne. "I must get my facts right. This man, Brotherton Drake, landed in England, you say, down and out. He returns third-class to America. What kind of a life was he leading in England?"

"That," said Diana, seeing in what kind of bog she might presently be foundering, "is nothing to do with you. I don't mean to be rude, Mr. Pyne."

He answered with a smile:

"There can be no impoliteness between impersonalities."

She threw up a hand with la laugh. "But you must look on me as a personality. How else could you take any human interest i the case? Why do you suppose I want to find this man?"

"How can I have any notion? From your general attitude I shouldn't say you want to bring him to justice for any reason."

"Quite the contrary," she declared.

He closed his notebook, put it in his pocket and rose.

"Grant me so much of your confidence, Miss Merrow, as to say that it would give you pleasure, if not a certain amount of happiness, if we found Mr. Drake."

She met frankly a kindly glimmer in the little fat man's dark eyes.

"It would. I might be able to pull him out of an awful hole he has dug for himself. I want to find him for his own sake. To do him good, not harm. I ought to have made that clear to you before. You understand, don't you?"

"I quite understand, Miss Merrow," said Nicholas Pyne.

The days of June crept on, with the heat of New York; and with them Diana's small acquaintance discreetly crept out. The heat from the myriad sun-baked buildings began to hang lower and lower over the airless thoroughfares. Some friends of the Stebbings' invited her to their camp in the Adirondacks. She resisted the temptation of sweet, clean living among sweet, clean folk. She must stay in New York. Business, she gave them to understand, was business. But while they thought of her business in terms of antique furniture, she thought of it in terms of Buddy Drake.

She sat one late afternoon by the window in her sitting-room looking from a now familiar but once a dizzying height, over the panorama of New York in pale dull gold of stagnant air. The mighty buildings near and far, towering above even her modest eyrie, dreamed superb in the haze of heat. Here and there the metal on a cupola caught by the sun struck a note of golden radiance. Below, dim, shadowy, countless tiers of windows too deep down for sun, whether eastern at dawn or western at eve, ever to shine upon; or deeper down still, as on some remote super-terrestrial surface, the entire traffic of the great east to west street; now an unmoving mass of tiny distinguishable surfaces, the roofs of motor-cars looking like black-beetles; now as though suddenly inspired into life, a swiftly moving mass of the seemingly insect horde.

Diana, sitting by her window, perched midmost between the sky which kissed the tops of infinitely soaring palaces and the seething earth below, seething in a horribly regulated organization, felt herself the loneliest thing that ever hovered in space between supreme beauty of human inspiration glorified by God and the hideous mechanism of soulless existence,

for ever hunted, for ever pushed around by the dull unminding and altogether abominable forces which constituted human life.

She sat by her window, moist in the oven-baked air, depressed and angry, making herself hotter by tearing herself to shreds. Diana—the Huntress. That was what she was. Hunting this wretched man down. Why should she go on? Why shouldn't she take the next boat to England and forget all about everything? What the devil was it inside her that kept her there, that compelled her with a force like a lodestone of life to await this man's discovery? He loved her. That she knew deep down in the depths of her femininity. He had thrown out towards her every kind of tentacle—psychical, spiritual, conscious, sub-conscious—with which man's desire for a woman could be equipped. Of his want of her she had no doubt. It certainly was the essence of what she chose to call her present idiot phase of existence. But she herself? She, Diana? What about the sane, sensible, all-knowing, all unshockable, modern yet fastidiously chaste entity that, to her, represented Diana? She shrugged her shoulders. She didn't care.

On an angle of the roof of a stunted ten-story building somewhere down the side street, she could see a woman taking down clothes from a line and a man watering a wooden box of flowers. She watched them idly till they disappeared behind the corner of the next house. She felt tired and dispirited. She had nothing to do. Nobody seemed to have any use for her.

The telephone bell rang like a carillon in her ears: a direct and joyous summons from the outer world. She danced scross the room to the instrument. The desk-clerk announced the presence downstairs of Mr. Nicholas Pyne.

"Oh, send him up," cried Diana.

Vanity-case in hand, she tidied herself before the mirror. When the bell-boy introduced her visitor, she went forward with outstretched hand.

"I've been wondering for days whether you had any news. Have you?"

"I think so," he said, "but I'm not quite sure. Have you anything to do this evening?"

"Nothing," said Diana.

"Would you care to go to a movie?"

Her heart fluttered, as her mind leaped to a conclusion.

"To identify him?"

He nodded. "The picture's showing at a not very swell house. Not like the Capitol or Roxy's. Nearly as big, though. In fact, it's away over in Brooklyn." To the New York mind Brooklyn, across the bridge, is not less remote than Philadelphia. "I think," he said diffidently, "you'd feel more comfortable if you didn't go alone."

Diana laughed. "You mean you'd like to take me to the movies?"

"Mrs. Pyne and I would."

"Your wife!"

She suffered the momentary little shock, familiar to every one, on realizing that the impersonal professional man with whom she came in contact, doctor, lawyer, policeman, has a private life of his own. Then she became aware of kindness beneath the alert, dark eyes. She added as quickly as she could:

"That's very charming of her."

"Not a bit. She's one of the firm. An unofficial member. She inspires confidence without asking for any. When I say 'confessional' she asks no questions. It's the only way of carrying on. I think you'll like her, Miss Merrow," he said with a little mixture of wistfulness and assurance.

"I'm sure I shall. What's the picture?"

"'The Daughters of Mammon.'"

Diana sighed. "Oh, Lord!" What was Buddy Drake doing in such an awful galley?

"Mrs. Pyne and myself thought you might do us the honour of having a hurried meal with us. The first principle of detective work is never to go hungry on a job if you can help it. There's a little Italian place down town—real New York, which English visitors—ladies like yourself—don't have much chance of seeing. If you would put yourself in our hands——?"

Diana at the moment would have put herself in the hands of anybody far less trustworthy than Mr. Nicholas Pyne. She gratefully accepted the invitation. Where and when should they meet?

"Mrs. Pyne is right here, waiting in the car," he said.

Diana went swiftly to the telephone. "Why didn't you tell me before? She must come up and have a cocktail. I've got my little cellar."

"She'll have as many cocktails as are good for her down town," he smiled. "So, if you don't mind"—he pulled out his watch—"I think we'd better be getting along."

They got along, soon were a unit in one of the moving, halting, tight masses that make up the traffic of New York. Mrs. Pyne was a smartly dressed, pink and white baby-faced young woman, with an incongruously strong and determined voice. She drove the car. Diana conjectured that she drove Nicholas just as efficiently. She felt protected, amused, exhilarated, on the threshold of something new, even though it were but to see the shadowy presentation of Buddy on the screen. Already she had asked the question:

"Is he mentioned by name?"

"If he was billed as Brotherton Drake, Miss Merrow," Pyne had replied, "I shouldn't have asked for your co-operation."

Diana had dined; dined excellently at the cosy little down-town speakeasy near whose threshold—so Diana was forced to imagine, for she saw his uniform, and his friendly nod to Nicholas Pyne—lingered a New York policeman, guarding it against possible indiscretion on the part of Federal Prohibition officers. Mrs. Pyne had told her in an hour more about New York than she had heard in a month. They had crossed the long, long bridge. It was still daylight; the gathering dusk of June summer-time. The car had stopped suddenly before a blinding glare of electric light. Mr. Pyne had taken her arm and led her across the pavement, and rushed back to park the car. She had waited in the crowded glittering hall of a Palace such as no djinn of "The Arabian Nights" had the supernatural capacity to imagine. There were brilliant kiosks around where brightly wrapped-up things could be bought. Hovering along the stream incoming from the long queue outside were uniformed officials, men and boys in pink and yellow uniforms. There were flaming posters of "The Daughters of Mammon" playing at being Mammonite for all they were worth; and great photographic enlargements of the stars. Mrs. Pyne had shaken hands with a young man in a dinner jacket who disappeared into the box-office and emerged with three tickets. Everything was moderately safe for Democracy in the queue; but the commanders of Privilege were a great deal safer. Thus, in America, combining as it does the social practices of France under Louis XIV and the theories of Soviet Russia, a delicious blend of all the harmonies, everybody is satisfied. Fat

little Nicholas Pyne had turned up perspiring, after having parked the car. Diana had wandered, under guidance, as in a daze.

She found herself in the middle of the front row of the slightly raised balcony of a vast sloping auditorium, which was rapidly filling with its new audience. The house was beautifully lit with subtly changing lights. She looked at the programme which a gaily uniformed girl attendant had slipped into her hand. It announced a variety entertainment before the film of "The Daughters of Mammon." She scanned the items with less interest than irritation. All that to be gone through before the picture! The irritation, however, she hid from her hosts between whom she was seated. They explained the ever-growing demands of American audiences. They required a longer evening's entertainment than that provided by an hour and a half of story on a screen.

The orchestra, now purple, now pink under the changing light, played the first item. The curtain rose on a terraced mass of dancers, who went through the Ziegfeld and Tiller convolutions. A pair of male dancers appeared, incredibly acrobatic. A piano was wheeled on to the stage for a woman singer. There was more troupe dancing, with lighting effects.

Diana, wearied with suspense, gave little heed to the stage. Her programme announced three or four more items. Her eye wandered round the dim crowded house. In the tier below her two girls were giggling and chewing gum. She caught a few words, "If she could let a bum guy like that put it over . . ." Men and women were very much the same on any continent. Women, she supposed, were always fools enough to be fooled by men whom they knew to be fools. The thought gave her no satisfaction.

When a ripple of laughter drew her attention to

the entertainment she became aware of a little man in a modified clown's costume trying to set up a small steel-legged table covered with a black cloth. As soon as he turned his back, the table collapsed flat. The same happened with a tall black cabinet on wheels which he pushed from the wings. In essence it was the clown's classical business, old as the hills yet ever appealing. It was done, too, with modern neatness. No sooner had he set the table on its feet and run to pick up the collapsed cabinet, than the table flopped flat. And vice versa. At last, midway between the fallen table and the tottering cabinet, the clown paused irresolute; then rushed back to the cabinet, holding it up with all his strength. Diana joined in the artless laughter, for he had impressed the audience with the idea that the two pieces of furniture were inspired by diabolical agencies.

Now, as he righted the cabinet, therefrom stepped a man vaguely Mephistophelean, in black tights, who snapped a finger at the fallen table, which immediately sprang up as if at attention, and then turning, he snapped again to secure the cabinet. That done, he plucked the conical cap from the clown's head, disclosing a mass of white hair. The cap flew up straight into the flies. The Mephistopheles drew from his person a large visiting card all phosphorescent, which he flicked towards the clown. It disappeared into thin air. But the clown put his hand to the back of his neck, as though struck, and drew from his collar a charred bit of cardboard which crumbled to dust in his fingers.

It was all done very quickly, before Diana had time to co-ordinate the strange little white-haired man with some vague picture of memory. She had seen him before somewhere. Not on the stage. She turned to Mrs. Pyne.

"Who are these?"

"Cyrus and Gaffarelli."

Gaffarelli . . . why, yes . . . and then, and then only, did she become aware of something familiar in the walk of the man in black. Her brain whirled in a wild surmise. Certainty came when he stood behind the table enveloped in light against a sudden background of blackness.

She gripped Nicholas Pyne's arm.

"My God!"

He had been watching her. "Am I right?"

"Yes. Quite right. That's Brotherton Drake."

She leaned back, feeling rather faint. The air was stifling. Mrs. Pyne asked:

"Do you want to stay out the turn?"

"No," said Diana. "I've seen enough. Let us get out."

In the lounge they sought the soda fountain. An iced drink revived her. She turned rather sharply on Nicholas Pyne.

"Was it necessary to stage this dramatic effect?"

"It was quick and conclusive, and saved a lot of unpleasant interviewing, to say nothing of the expense."

"But if you were sure?"

"I wasn't sure. I told you so. If you inquired of the management here, you'd find they had never heard of Brotherton Drake. He has taken the professional name of Cyrus Bendyke. We traced him through Professor Gaffarelli, who was once very well known in vaudeville as a conjurer."

Diana laughed without much mirth, and the Pynes saw no reason for laughter. Professor Gaffarelli—the learned Professor from Turin (was it Turin?) whom the false Atherton had engaged to be his private secretary. Without a shirt!

"Why doesn't he wear a shirt?" She remembered her question. It was all horribly funny.

"Bendyke—is that the name?"

Pyne scribbled on a leaf from his notebook.

"That's the name. And the address where he's staying at present. This theatre, care of the Management, would, of course, find him."

She folded up the paper and put it in her bag. The great foyer was practically empty save for a few idlers, mainly in couples, who were regarding photographs and candy and cigar-stands. Outside, beyond the great open doors, rushed the traffic of the busy Brooklyn street.

"There is one thing I ought to tell you, Miss Merrow," said Nicholas Pyne, drawing her away from his wife, "something that may be serious." His fat, dark face assumed an expression of responsibility, like that of a physician or lawyer about to give bad news. "The New York police aren't such fools as they're made out to be in detective stories, or on the first page of newspapers. They know a lot. They know a lot about Mr. Brotherton Drake. What it is they won't tell me. If they would, I'd tell you. But it's something. I'm asking no questions. In case you know anything yourself, it's my duty to warn you."

Diana stood rigid. The impossible, irresponsible man was then in danger, here in New York. She said:

"In that case I must see him to-night. At once. He's in this building. How can I manage it?"

"His turn is nearly over by now. Give him a few minutes to change and we can meet him by the stage-door entrance."

"We?"

"Mrs. Pyne and I. Do you suppose we'd leave you all alone in Brooklyn?"

He smiled. She responded.

"You're rather a couple of dears," she said.

So they went out of the achingly brilliant light into the comparative gloom of the street, and eventually up a dim, close alley-way towards the end of which was the stage-door. And there they waited. All kinds of people trickled out. At last two figures emerged, one tall, one short. One had a bunch of white hair beneath a jaunty soft felt hat. The other was unmistakably Buddy Drake.

Diana rushed forward from the side of the wall and confronted him in the wedge of light from the open door.

He fell back, stared at her; cried foolishly, "Diana!" and then swept her up in his arms.

CHAPTER XXI

THE Pynes faded down the alley-way. Tonio withdrew into the dimness beyond the shaft of light. When mutual release happened, the two actors in the impulsive scene regarded each other rather foolishly, though their eyes still shone.

"It's you, of course. But it's amazing," he cried. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you—what else? Or rather," she corrected herself, "I came to New York on business and thought I might as well look for you."

"You've found me right enough. Though how, God knows. It's more than wonderful."

"I have some friends who helped me." She looked around. "They've gone." She made towards Tonio, holding out her hand. "This is Professor Gaffarelli, I think. Your private secretary."

"Now my partner."

Tonio uncovered his white head and bowed over the lady's hand.

"I suppose you were in front," said Buddy. "Yes? Well, you've seen how a man, in Life, can play many parts——" He broke off and seized her hands. "My God! This is more than wonderful."

Tonio approached, again raising his hat.

"Forgive me if I leave you, Miss Merrow. I go home. No doubt you would like to have some conversation with"—he paused, smiling—"Mr. Bendyke."

He bowed, and walked off at a smart pace. Diana

and Buddy followed him more slowly. He took her arm and walked close to her.

"Why have you been trying to find me?"

"I think I've made it pretty obvious to everybody. Except you, perhaps."

"My dear, I'm dazed. I've loved you and dreamed of you and wanted you ever since the first day I met you. But you? How could I tell? How can you reconcile me with the man I was?"

"Because you weren't," she said.

He checked her abruptly at the street end of the alley-way, struck by a note in her voice.

"What do you mean?"

"You weren't, you aren't Atherton Drake. You're Brotherton Drake, generally known as Buddy Drake. Atherton's dead. You took his place. I know all about it."

Buddy stood silent for a moment, unable to decide whether things were growing simplified or more complicated.

"I've only told two people in the world," he said in a low voice. "Horatio Flower and Tonio Gaffarelli. Tonio couldn't have told you."

"It was Horatio. He had to. I guessed. Muriel guessed. Bronson almost guessed. Any fool knowing you would have guessed. Not that you were Brotherton—but at any rate that you weren't Atherton. You gave yourself away all over the place. What time is it?"

He looked at his watch. "Half-past nine."

"We'd better get back to New York and get things straightened out," she said decisively.

She hailed a yellow taxi-cab.

"I'm afraid, my dear," said he, "I haven't a suite of rooms at a Plaza-Athénée to receive you in—not even a public lounge."

She cut him short, gave the address of her hotel to the driver, and entered the cab.

"I've a sitting-room at the Rochester," she said when he joined her and the taxi started.

They passed over the bridge and through the city of myriad lights, unreal, fantastic, culminating in the phantasmagoria of Broadway. At this hour of the summer evening traffic was thin. They spoke little; they held hands, both wondering in their respective ways at the new and strange happiness that linked them together. Their momentary lives were bounded by the side and front of the taxi-cab, caring nothing for the outside world. When it drew up at the door of the hotel, they gasped, laughing, unable to account for the swiftness of their journey.

Buddy leaped out, paid the driver and followed Diana into the hotel.

That was the first of their many meetings, their many talks, their many confidences, their many seekings for escape from a great dilemma, their many searchings of heart and conscience.

Buddy, as far as he could be aware, threw open all the doors of his past life. In some unlocked recesses were shames, in others aspirations; here were herded follies innumerable; there lurked repentances; in one lurked despair, in another, laughter.

He explained Tonio. What else could he have done than turn him into a British Grenadier?

It was to Tonio now that he owed his means of livelihood. He had landed in New York almost as penniless as he had landed in England. A certain sum he had taken from Atherton's funds to keep Tonio and himself from starvation. They had lived cheaply, more or less as he had lived in the old days, while they had invented and perfected their conjuring act.

At first they had earned very little. Eventually Tonio had found a former friend and manager in authority at the Brooklyn Cinema Theatre. This had been their first week of big money. They had made a hit. An agent was booking them a tour.

Why the professional name, Cyrus Bendyke? He had proclaimed himself as such to the mysterious Chrysolos whom he had so exultantly fooled. Should the Greek, unsatisfied with his barren vengeance, trace Atherton across the seas, he must again come upon Cyrus Bendyke, the American actor who he knew was not Atherton Drake.

His flight from England? He had been driven by Fear. Cold, awful Fear. For the first time in his life he knew what it meant to be shadowed. He had the first suspicion of the fact in Liverpool, when Tonio and himself had come out of the American Consulate where they had procured visas on their old passports. This procedure had been long, as there happened to be a great crowd of emigrants; but simple, because, for one thing, Tonio was an American citizen, and, for the other, Brotherton Drake's passport was dated long before the quota laws, and he had lived so long in the country that he was privileged to return indefinitely. In London, outside their obscure Bloomsbury hotel, he had seen the same watcher as in Liverpool. Then there was another man. And wherever he went one of the two was unobtrusively present.

That night in January, when he had dismissed his cab in Knightsbridge and walked down Sloane Street in the rain, he thought he had shaken off the detective. But at Waterloo there was one of them patiently watching. At Southampton Docks, near the gangway of the "Homeric," there was the man again making sure that he had gone aboard.

The voyage had been a nightmare, the landing in

New York a sickening terror. Then, finding himself free and unquestioned, it dawned on him gradually that the Foreign Office and Scotland Yard might possibly have been glad to get rid of Sir Atherton Drake.

Diana told him of her talk with Sir Hugo Bellamy.

"He was right," said Buddy. "Only they gave me no direct hint. Their following me around without arresting me was hint enough."

To Diana much of his story, or rather the story of Atherton and Buddy's impersonation of Atherton, was an extravaganza indubitably true. The cipher, the untraceable account in the Lothbury Bank, Chrysolos, all belonged to the realm of the fantastic.

"The cheque-book, anyhow," said Diana, "was definite. Every cheque and counterfoil is numbered and can easily be traced. There must be ways of discovering the customer to whom the cheque-book was issued."

"I never thought of that," said Buddy. "I pitched it into the fire with the rest of the stuff."

"You seem to have been pitching things into the fire most of your life," cried Diana.

She questioned him as to his affairs, or rather those of the presumably living Atherton in London. Buddy shrugged his shoulders. As far as he knew they were doing quite well. Dividends from the various investments were pouring automatically into the Hanover Square bank, swelling the current balance whereby the bank was greatly profiting. That balance also must have been swollen by the proceeds of the sale of Newstead Park. The last thing he had heard of the place was that some people called Simpkins or Perkins had bought it.

"Wilkins," Diana corrected. "South African people." Muriel had called on them. They were

bright and merry and would liven the neighbourhood. Father, mother, son and daughter, all born apparently in the saddle, were heartily welcomed by Horatio.

The Park Lane flat was shut up. The keys were with Edgar Fry, the solicitor, who paid the rent on a lease several years still to run. Buddy had given him power of attorney at their last interview, before his bolt to Southport. Atherton's estate was just there; to say lying fallow would be wrong, because it was increasing by dividends month by month. What the super-tax people were doing he didn't know and didn't care. At any rate, being out of the country, he made no returns; he doubted whether the lawyers could. That, however, was their funeral. At which announcement Buddy grinned cheerfully.

Before leaving England he had sent Edgar Fry the two thousand pounds due to him under Atherton's will. He prided himself on the ingenious anonymity of the payment. With a view to it, for the matter had lain all the time on his conscience, he had been drawing from the bank notes of fairly large denominations, together with smaller ones, ostensibly for ordinary cash expenses. When he had collected enough, he had gone to the Bank of England and exchanged them for a couple of £1000 notes which he had put into a registered envelope and posted from the City to Edgar Fry.

"Simple, wasn't it?"

Diana, in answer to the question, shook her head.

"What a child you are!"

"Well, I'd like to know," he said, "how you would have managed it without giving yourself away."

"Not having put myself into such a horrible mess," said Diana, "I can't exactly tell. How do you know," she asked, "whether he ever got it?"

"Got it? By registered post?" Buddy, with an

exiled Briton's belief in British institutions, regarded her as though he could have mistrusted the hand of an Angel—professional Messenger—of Heaven. "Of course he got it. He couldn't acknowledge it, because he didn't know where it came from. And, even if he did, he couldn't, because he didn't know my address. Doesn't to this day."

"I was sure of it," said Diana, with a smile of satisfaction. "I told him so to his face."

Their talks were spread over many occasions. Usually they took place in Diana's sitting-room. For the first few days Buddy's time was limited. At the Brooklyn theatre they gave two full shows a day. Getting backwards and forwards by subway from his shabby, cheap, down-town hotel took up considerable time. And then there were the morning practices on which Tonio, guide of their joint fortunes, insisted, so that fingers should be kept supple and eye unerring. This rehearsing continued during the next week, after the engagement had ended and he was free. They had a fortnight out, their tour, somewhat sporadic as yet, not beginning till a date in July.

On the first Sunday of freedom they went up the Hudson, by car, beyond Dobb's Ferry, and found a little restaurant with a garden, somewhat crowded, it is true, by New Yorkers whom the baking city had sent out panting for cooling airs, but still fresh and leafy. They brought Tonio with them. Diana, predisposed to admire the kindliness, wisdom and loyalty of the little man, fell in love with him. For one thing he was a white-haired grown-up romance. He had run the gamut of social vicissitude. Once, successful artist, he had saved Buddy from death, and, life assured, from subsequent starvation. Then—she looked at his gnarled, maimed hands—he had sunk to the degrading depths of poverty. Buddy had

miraculously found him—without a shirt!—and for a few months had set him in the midst of all the comfort of luxurious living. And now, after a spell of evil weather, here he was back again in the old profession, partner in, and so much part and parcel of, their combination, "Cyrus & Gaffarelli," that no one, not even themselves, could tell where one began and the other ended, and on the road again to queer success. He was so modest, yet so enthusiastic.

It is a poor human being who is insensible to the fascination of magic, even though it be that of an advowedly fraudulent magician. How can a man produce a bowl of goldfish from nowhere? How can innumerable eggs proceed from his gradually widening lips. How could a table, as Diana asked, act like a malignant, sentient thing?

Tonio, delighted, gave away the magician's secrets: cunning electric control, invisible wiring and switches; perfect timing. Buddy and he had worked it out together; all Buddy's imagination and handy man's knowledge of mechanical things. He himself had been only a conjurer, an expert in prestidigitation—in which art Buddy had been, and still was, his pupil. The consummation of the partnership was the present act which, having in it something of novelty, seemed to please the public. Meanwhile they were planning and rehearsing other effects.

The afternoon passed pleasantly. Diana found herself admiring Buddy's attitude towards the little man; his self-effacement so that the other should shine. She knew that if she referred to it he would say with a laugh: "It's Tonio's day out."

During the next week they saw each other every day. They surrendered themselves to the idyllic, seeking each other and rejoicing secretly at discovery.

It was she, the woman, who discovered the more, in spite of Buddy's conviction that he had stripped his soul bare of any shred of disguise.

"If you want to see an absolutely naked fool," he said, "here you have one."

She lay back, her eyes melting. "Yet, somehow, a very dear and precious fool. I wouldn't change you for another wrapped up to the neck in wisdom."

Which was all very pretty but led to no practical line of contact. For each, being endowed with ordinary sanity, knew that before them loomed a future which, as far as lay in human power, must be jointly determined. Now and then she would tentatively refer to it, but he brushed her allusions aside.

"Let us live just for a little in the present. Let me feel the grace of your—of you, yourself, about me. I've had such a rotten time. Oh, I don't want pity. I've contrived every bit of it for myself. The wonder is how I generally manage to get through. God, I suppose, takes a hand. He must. How else could I have got you?"

Buddy was good to look upon: slim, brown-haired, finely featured, with blue eyes that could dance with merriment and quickly make an appeal of great wistfulness. He was well-knit, clean in body and mind, sincere in his adoration; a personality eager for sympathy both to receive and to give. And Diana vibrated with the stirrings of youth, which may or may not be—it all is a matter of the infallibility of opposing systems of philosophy—the promptings of eternal wisdom. So she took, in her young hunger, all that he gave; gave all that he, devotedest of lovers, craved from the idyllic moment. All a young woman's moral structure from her brain to the pulses in her feet can be as hard as nails when she is selling a chair; but that is no reason for denying that every-

thing within her may be as soft as butter when disposing of her heart.

So Diana yielded, and spoke no more of the future, which, however, when she was alone in her eyrie, looking from her window at the bewildering towers of the vast and alien city, loomed, black and threatening, blotting out the far blue of the late June sky.

It was not so much a question of what would be the end, as of what was to be the beginning. When they emerged from this evanescent land of the fantastic, from what point of real existence could they start? The glamour of worshipping eyes and of dear words, the thrill of clasping arms and of kisses—all that was joy undeniable; but it was momentary. It could not remain for all time unless it was—what? Her mind sought a word, a figure, an analogy. She stumbled lamely on the painter's term—fixed. There must be something to save the bloom from being brushed or blown away. What could there be in definite action, calm, deliberate action, to fix the ephemeral loveliness of their idyll?

She began to worry herself into sleepless nights, the effect of which she strove to hide from Buddy at their next meeting. And so there came a day when she noticed lines around Buddy's eyes and at the corners of his lips, and signs all but imperceptible that, with him, too, the dream was beginning to fade into a despair.

They had arranged a jaunt—this time to Coney Island, which she had never seen; Tonio to be their companion. Lest Buddy's pride should suffer, she had hired for a month the car that had taken them up the Hudson, giving him to understand that it had been her customary apanage in New York, essential to her business. He had no reason for doubt. A woman's car is her car. Social convention makes it as

unthinkable for a man who is her passenger-guest to offer to pay for her petrol as to pay for her stockings.

Diana, at the appointed hour of meeting, went down to the comfortable discreet lounge of her hotel. A moment afterwards Buddy and Tonio entered.

"What lovely punctual people!"

They smiled at her gay greeting, but she was quick to detect anxious faces.

"What's the matter? Tell me."

Buddy told her. The agent, Bernheimer, had let them down badly over the tour. Instead of being continuous their engagements—only pencilled as yet, with no signed contracts—were for odd weeks here and there, spreading through several months. Bernheimer had sprung the news on them by telephone that morning.

"We thought it was all fixed up," said Tonio. "Were to go and sign the contracts on Friday."

Buddy shrugged dejected shoulders. "It's all in the day's work."

"My poor dears," said Diana, looking from one to the other. "What are you going to do about it?" She hesitated for a second or two. "Do you feel like Coney Island?" They didn't. "Neither do I," said Diana.

"I must go and see the brute, my dear," said Buddy. "A greasy, oily, slippery beast. He has filled up our weeks with more expensive turns. Bigger commission for him, don't you see?"

"It seems a short-sighted policy," said Diana.

"Thieves like Bernheimer believe in it. They get the dollars when they can. As quick as possible."

They discussed for a while the unpleasing proposition. Diana was indignant. Then Buddy announced that, subject to her graciousness in cancelling the Coney

Island excursion, he had made an appointment with the unspeakable Bernheimer.

"Take the car and come back and tell me all about it," said Diana.

"That's sweet of you," said Buddy. "But Tonio. He wants to come with me. I don't want him. He's about as fit to deal with Bernheimer as with a slimy arch-devil in hell."

"I'll keep Tonio till you come back," said Diana.

On such a little decision was to hang the fate of all three.

For the first time Diana and Tonio found themselves alone together. They had mounted, after Buddy's departure, to her little apartment.

"This," she said, "must be an awful blow to Buddy."

He did not reply for some time. Then he said earnestly:

"Miss Merrow, perhaps it is a good thing for Buddy, a blessing in disguise."

His tone startled her. "How?" she asked.

"Do you think Buddy is a happy man? How can he be when he loves you and you love him?"

She looked deep into his kind, dark eyes.

"Tell me exactly what is in your mind, Tonio. I think I know. If it's the same that has been at the back of mine, I'll understand. You're a true friend to Buddy."

"Friend?" cried Tonio, with a smile. "He is more than that. He is the only human being I have to love in the whole world. I would die for him."

"You can love me a bit too, then, for his sake," said Diana, "so you'll have another."

There was a moment's interlude; for the moistening of eyes, a laugh, the lighting of cigarettes.

"Tell me," she said.

"We know Buddy, you and I. He is capable of all

follies—but no really bad follies. An impulse, an adventure occurs to him, and so long as it hurts nobody —well, he can't resist. It's his nature. But also he is sensitive, generous, loyal. He lives clean ; always has. Once he drank too much whisky—years ago. But now he drinks for his health or his pleasure, just like you and me. Since the day he picked me off the Boulevards in Paris with my monkeys, never, never has he exceeded. It is right I should tell you this. He is a dear, good, good man, and "—he paused, and bent down in front of her, touching her shoulder and looking into her eyes as he spoke—" he is going through hell."

She said, her face set :

" Yes. I'm beginning to realize it. And it's up to us to follow him."

" That," said Tonio, turning away and waving a crippled hand, " is beyond me. That is for you. I can only tell you about Buddy. He is a man without a name, without a country. I know everything. If he went back to England as Atherton Drake, he would be arrested for—for what ?—treason. In his own real character, Brotherton Drake, he is a criminal. If all were known, your police could come right here and arrest him."

" I know," said Diana tonelessly. " As it is, the New York police know something against him. What it is I don't know. Our Foreign Office may think he's Atherton masquerading as the dead Brotherton, and have warned New York. It's an insoluble mix-up."

" My dear lady," said Tonio, " that's not the question. We are dealing with Buddy himself as a human being who suffers. Look. Let me talk. If he was a man of no account, like me, without any ties, just a bit of mud thrown up by the sea, it wouldn't matter. But he isn't. He has you. He is a hunted—

—a criminal, without any home, without a sure way of making a living. You see for yourself. What is he doing now with this dreadful man, Bernheimer? What can he hope for? For himself, as I've said, what does it matter? He has starved in his time, and God has pulled him through. So it may be again. But you? He and you are one now. What are you going to do?"

She rose and drew herself up and, even in his emotional state, he saw that her face had gone suddenly white.

"You think there is only one thing for him to do —for his real happiness. For mine—for our future?"

He knew that she understood, and moved away with a vague gesture of assent and a whisper.

"Yes."

She swayed for a moment or two. Then, white and shaken, she crossed the room and clasped Tonio's head between her hands.

"He's a real man, Tonio, isn't he?" she cried rather wildly.

"A real man," said Tonio.

"Then he shall do it. We'll do it together, he and I. The next boat home. And you too, Tonio. You're part of us."

Buddy came back dejected. She asked:

"Well?"

"You know your 'Merchant of Venice'—'You may as well use question with the wolf,' etc. It's about the end of things."

He threw himself into a chair. Diana knelt beside him.

"I've been talking with Tonio. It's not the end, but a beginning. There's only one thing in the world for you to do."

He looked at her haggardly. "I know what you're going to say. Go back and face the music—the whole awful jazz band."

She sat back on her heels. "How did you guess?"

"I know what any decent man or woman must think of me. But suppose I do. How's that going to help things—except from the point of view of my own private conscience? What about you?"

She sat still further back on her heels, her whole youth taut before him.

"Me. I don't count for much. But, anyway, I'll face any kind of old music with you, from now to the end of your life."

Tonio went to the open window and, resting his elbows on the protecting bar, looked out at the magic city. Presently he felt his shoulder in a strong grip. He turned and saw a new Buddy.

"We're going to Coney Island, after all. We're going to have a hell of a time."

CHAPTER XXII

NOT long afterwards they sailed from New York, booking their passages under the names of Sir Brotherton and Lady Drake. They must sail under true colours from the start, said Diana.

It was she who had insisted on their marriage. She had put forward arguments so cogent that Buddy was compelled to yield. At first he had resisted stubbornly, stirred by every instinct of conventional honour. He knew and she knew to what shame and disgrace he, of his own free will, was heading.

"If you think I'm too feeble to stand it," said Diana, "you'd better tell me now, and we'll have done with it once and for all."

This was unanswerable. To him she gleamed a faultless radiance sheltering him from the dark wrath of God.

He fell back on his second line of defence. There would be imprisonment. Separation for God knows how many years. That alone made marriage impossible.

"Why? You think it honourable to give me the chance of changing my mind Some other man might come along and I'd be quite justified in looking on all this as a nightmare. Or else, when it was over and you were free again, I might shrink from you in horror. Let us be blatantly frank. There's no other way. That's what worrying you, isn't it?"

Of course it was. If she still loved him the prison gates would open into heaven.

She countered. That was his point of view, which she appreciated—the point of view of the perfectly honest but stupidly selfish man. What about her point of view? Her feelings? Had he ever summoned up the sense or taken the trouble to appreciate them? She loved him. She supposed he had got that fact nailed into his head. And he loved her?

"Oh, my God!" groaned Buddy.

Well, there was the position. She had pledged herself to face things with him, share things with him, physically as far as material things allowed, spiritually with all that was in her, till the end of time. Did he understand that?

"As far as man can understand miracles," said Buddy.

"There's no miracle about it. We're just two human beings who know their life's happiness is bound up in each other. What do you suppose would be for my greater happiness? To wait for you, as a girl, eating my heart out for you, with no real bond between us, or as your wife, with all its pride of responsibility? And supposing there was a child. Wouldn't that be a joy and a help to us both?"

Buddy sat with his hands over his eyes and muttered something about the poor little devil's father being in gaol. She swung his hands away with hers. What did it matter? It would be something for the boy to be proud of when he was able to understand. She would see to that.

This was the end of the argument of their last discussion. She stood before him superb and glowing.

"What else have you got to say?"

He was dumb. What could man say? She laughed, as his arms closed around her.

And so they were married and Tonio was best man. She posted announcements to her friends in America a few hours before the boat sailed.

Tonio, as she had decided, accompanied them. Merro, Ltd., was understaffed. Pilkington must find a corner in which Tonio, keen and intelligent, could be of great service. He might be invaluable. Give him a soap-box, said Diana, and, before a customer's eyes, he could turn it, with a flicker of his hands, into a quattrocento *cassone*. Tonio could also help her to face the music.

Her last few days in New York had whirled by in sudden activities. A friend of John P. Stebbings had bought the famous bed, subject to his nominated London expert's report. One of her American customers, dashing through New York on his way from Mexico to Canada, had summoned her by telephone to an interview in which he had given her orders to find various expensive odds and ends of Renaissance furniture—Spanish if possible—for a house he was building in Santa Barbara. He scouted the idea of her losing heart in the project of a New York branch. Get him what he wanted—he had the most clear and accurate knowledge of it—and he would guarantee a successful start. At the same time, dealers who had hitherto held her in some suspicion approached her with business propositions. Thus the financial prospects of Merro, Ltd., were greatly brightened. The firm could well afford to look after Tonio, whose future had been, at first, Buddy's chief concern.

The "Aquitania" was full, it being the season of the great American pilgrimage to Europe. The three sat together at an obscure corner table in the immense saloon; but except at meals Tonio was seldom with them. He had a wraith-like way of disappearing

into remote recesses of the ship, and an uncanny faculty of being within call whenever his presence was required. Buddy and Diana kept apart from the social life of the gay community. They allowed, through here and there a channel—doctor, purser, stewards—the whisper to circulate that they were a honeymoon couple desirous of being undisturbed. The Americans had never heard of Sir Anything Drake. They admired the bride, who was fair to look upon. The English, some of whom had heard of Atherton, wondered who the devil he was. They were lucky in finding no personal acquaintance on board.

So they lived a strangely quiet, isolated and unmolested life. And for the two of them it was a life of intense happiness dignified by the tragedy which, hour by hour, they were inevitably nearing. They loved most to sit on the boat-deck, in a space between two boats, on the windward side which, as the weather was rough and squally, was shunned as comfortless by other passengers. There they could stay almost thrillingly alone between the grey sky and the grey-green sea, and either hold hands in silent communion, or talk of things past, present and to come, each in intimate search of understanding in the soul of the other.

They had their light moments. Both were endowed with the High God's supreme gift to man—the gift of laughter. Each could give the Tragic Mask a twist, rendering it grotesque, incongruous with itself, an object provocative of mirth.

"Let us think of it in terms of the War," she said once. "You couldn't have done it, as a matter of fact, unless I'd been a poor little female Hindu; but, for the sake of argument . . . Suppose we had been married and you went out and had been taken

prisoner—there were thousands of cases like that—we should have stuck the four years' separation, and now would scarcely ever think of it. Let us call it a war."

"Compared with the one I went through," he laughed, "this promises to be a damned comfortable War. You won't live for days and nights in wet clothes, with beastly things exploding all around you, and sometimes hitting you and hurting you like hell; and you won't have to pretend that the bit of jelly that you are from your brain to your heels is an iron rod, so as to bluff a lot of other poor devils into the belief that it's really a Sunday school treat or a garden party. And prisons! My God! German prison-camps! You're right, darling, we'll look on it as a War—and I'll wallow in it."

Yet, when she lay shiveringly awake at night, she would creep across the cabin to the bed in which he was sleeping, and take him all in her arms and, awaking him, say:

"Oh, Buddy darling, tell me I'm doing right. Tell me you don't hate me for making you do this. You can stick it, can't you? If you can't, I can't, either. If you like, I'll jump overboard with you to-morrow."

And Buddy would hold her close and comfort her. Never to shorn lamb was the wind more divinely tempered.

When sheer physical constriction in the narrow couch forbade the relaxation necessary to slumber, she would creep back to her own bed and sleep till morning. Then she would arise, and stand before him a dusky dream of dawn.

"I wasn't too much of a damn little fool in the night, was I?"

"You?"

And he would say the words of foolishness of which no man need ever repent.

When nearing Cherbourg she stood with him, watching the shore, her arm in his.

"It's the last chance, Buddy. You can land here and be safe."

"What should I get out of it?" he asked.

"Your liberty."

"Possibly. But I should lose you."

She shook her head. "You couldn't—now."

"The outside of you would remain mine," he replied. "But the inside—the something that matters to me far more than life and liberty, would be gone. You may say 'No' out of loyalty until you're black in the face. But I know. I've only one way of making good in your eyes—and in my own. Then, please God, we'll see life in the same focus. It may be an optical delusion; but, so long as we're both deluded and both satisfied till the end of things, we'll be happy."

She shivered. "'I'm a woman, and therefore full of fears.' I forget who wrote that—or something like it. Sometimes it's a silly thing to be a woman: always up against the unexpected."

He pressed her close to him and smiled down on her.

"Would you like me to land? Wouldn't it spoil everything?"

"If only you can stick it and come out the same. That's my terror."

"I stuck the War—as I've already told you—and came through it all right. And there wasn't you at the end of it."

When the gangway was drawn up from the tender and the engines of the great ship began to throb again, she drew him away from the side.

"If you had got off, I should have gone with you —with a load off my heart. But it would only have been light for a week. Now I thank God you didn't."

They had an affecting little scene in a corner of the smoking-room, whither they retired, at the end of which Buddy, lighting a cigarette, made his final debonair confession.

"I know I'm a silly ass, my dear. But remember that a silly ass, when roused, turns into an obstinate mule."

At Southampton, amid preparations for landing, a middle-aged man, inconspicuously dressed, came up to Buddy and Diana.

"Sir Atherton Drake?"

"No," said Buddy, "my name's Brotherton. Sir Brotherton Drake. Here is my passport."

The man glanced at it and returned it.

"Could we have a few words together?"

"Certainly," said Buddy, and led the way to the great empty drawing-room. "Your name?"

"Inspector Moggeridge of Scotland Yard."

"This is my wife, Lady Drake," said Buddy. "She knows everything that's to be known, which is a lot more than you can say, inspector. Do sit down."

"I have a warrant for your arrest, as Sir Atherton Drake," said Inspector Moggeridge. "You left England for America in January under a false name —Brotherton. Those are our instructions. It was thought in certain quarters that you wouldn't return to England. I needn't go into details. But when we got word from the New York police that you were coming back, also in a false name, we were bound to take action."

"Why?" asked Buddy. "What are the grounds,

or reasons or whatever you may call it, of your warrant ? ”

“ Defence of the Realm Act. Communication with the Enemy.”

“ But I'm not Sir Atherton Drake,” said Buddy with a smile. “ I'm his twin brother, Brotherton Drake, the heir to the title. Sir Atherton died last November.”

The inspector stared at him in some confusion.

“ According to our information, it was Sir Atherton's twin who died in November.”

“ No,” said Buddy. “ That's where everybody's wrong. Sir Atherton Drake is dead. I can get you a hundred witnesses to prove that I can't by any possibility be Sir Atherton Drake. I can get them from all over America. Needn't go as far as that. Dr. Selous of Harley Street, the great heart specialist, my brother's medical adviser, will tell you so, in five minutes.”

“ You may say so. It's not for me, for the moment, to doubt your word,” said the inspector courteously. “ But the whole thing is entirely incomprehensible.”

“ I suppose it is,” said Buddy. “ But listen. In a few words, this is what happened.” He told him rapidly. “ And my only reason for coming back to England is to give myself up for whatever the crime may be of impersonation.”

The inspector was staggered by the unexpectedness of the criminal situation.

“ That's my case,” said Buddy cheerfully. “ What are you going to do about it ? ”

The inspector prescribed summary appearance before chiefs of Scotland Yard on his arrival in London.

“ That's what I anticipated,” said Buddy. “ But I hope you'll let Lady Drake and myself travel in comfort ? No handcuffs and that sort of thing.”

The inspector laughed. "Of course not. It's understood that you'll accompany me, on arrival at Waterloo, to Scotland Yard."

"Quite understood, inspector. I know that you and your people will see that I don't slip away in the meanwhile."

Inspector Moggeridge rose, bowed to Diana and left them. Diana said, with a queer proud glance at him:

"Again I thank God you didn't land at Cherbourg."

CHAPTER XXIII

IT did not take very long to convince the Treasury or that strange concatenation of authorities, responsible for Crown Prosecutions which act under its name and ægis, that Sir Atherton Drake was dead, and that all the King's Counsel and all the King's men could not arrest him and put him on trial for his grievous offences. The same august, and, to most Englishmen, obscure Power—for how can the ordinary man, hardened and obfuscated by his own affairs, correlate the interdependencies of the Department of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Home Office, the realm of the great Law Offices of the Crown, that of the Director of Public Prosecutions, and the awful potency of Great Scotland Yard?—had got the conviction nailed into its head by incontrovertible proof that the man generally known as Buddy Drake was Brotherton Drake, twin brother of the late Sir Atherton and incontestably his successor to the baronetcy. In the establishment of his identity Buddy was triumphant. Through all his foolish years he had kept his papers—certificates of birth and marriage, his war papers, his precious Military Cross. His process of identification had its grotesque side in the horrified confusion of the eminent heart specialist, Selous, and the unsuspecting solicitor, Edgar Fry. The former, both privately, and, afterwards publicly at the trial, had to confess to being utterly deceived. Called in suddenly he was confronted by a man whom

he had no reason to doubt to be Sir Atherton, and the dead body of a man shabbily dressed declared to be that of Sir Atherton's twin brother. His examination had shown him beyond question that the man had died of the identical disease from which Sir Atherton might have died at any moment.

The possibility of such a trick as sudden impersonation had never crossed his mind. It had entered nobody's mind—Edgar Fry's, the bank cashier's, Bronson's. The only worry that had agitated Dr. Selous was his patient's successful efforts to keep out of his way. At their first and only interview he had been put off the track by impersonation's clever trick of the phial of drops and the wineglass with its pink residue. No wonder his patient had avoided him; for here was a man with a constitution as sound as the engine of a Rolls-Royce, with battle-scars (confirmed by document) which Atherton Drake could not possibly have incurred. There, then, was Bronson, Horatio Flower, Professor Gaffarelli, to testify. Buddy's identification was a simple affair.

Sir Atherton Drake and his alleged misdeeds vanished from human ken after a sudden dazzling flare of publicity like that of a magnesium flash. But the case of Sir Brotherton Drake, who gave himself up to justice on all the counts that could be involved in impersonation, was reported, with or without journalistic embellishment, all over the English-speaking earth.

Then Buddy awoke, not one morning but after many miserable mornings, to find himself famous.

Perhaps, if he had not confessed to the destruction of a will, the world's sympathy would have been with him. The actuality of Romance so seldom sweeps across a myriad heart-strings in a queer chord of music. If this had been, in brief, his confession:

"I came destitute, not through evil-doing but by force of adverse circumstances, to my rich brother for temporary aid. He had certain private reasons for hating me. In the course of argument and quarrel, he informed me that he was a man doomed to death at any moment, and taunted me with the specific declaration that he had made a will under which I should not benefit. He fell down dead of his heart malady. I was destitute. Being practically in person and speech indistinguishable from my twin brother, I conceived the sudden mad idea of changing our identities. I began to try to live his life. The will to which he referred I never saw. His solicitors testify that they had sent him the will for purposes of alteration a week before his death. I found no will—or nobody can prove I saw one. He must have destroyed his will. Therefore all my crazy impersonation went for nothing. If I had acted in the normal, sensible way and remained myself, Brotherton Drake, I should have inherited automatically. But his taunt about the will was the mainspring of my act. As soon as I entered on his life, so different from my own, I found myself faced by unexpected complications. I was, as I say, penniless. There was my brother's fortune automatically, through the absence of will, my own. But by my folly in impersonating my dead brother, in making a false registry of death, in forging his name, I had put myself into an inextricably false position. I had to go on. But when I realized that I had assumed my brother's moral responsibilities, responsibilities that I could not possibly face, I fled the country. And then, learning that as Sir Atherton Drake I should not be permitted to land ever again on British soil, and considering the fortune inherited from my brother as tainted at the source, I came back with my beautiful wife, a woman well known in the

social and intellectual world of London, to give myself up to justice."

If this had been the summary of his plea—it must be said again—he would have commanded the romantic sympathy of the English-speaking world.

But he had made full confession. The will returned a few days before from the solicitors was among his brother's papers. Finding that he was not a beneficiary under it, he had destroyed it, after noting specific bequests to individuals. These he had found means of paying.

Now, according to Anglo-Saxon tradition, a will is sacred, no matter how incredibly silly may be its provisions. To throw it into the fire is an act of sacrilege. More—it was common robbery.

The question of this supreme avowal had been the subject of soul-searching discussion between Buddy and Diana, during the dreadful period between his commitment by the magistrate to the Central Criminal Court, when he was out on bail. They lived together in Diana's flat off Sloane Street. It was a life of passionate love and agony of purpose. Tonio, often admitted to their consultations, implored Buddy's ignorance of the will. On that very postulate he had originally counselled confession. Even Edgar Fry could see no argument against the hypothesis that Atherton himself had destroyed the will. He had enclosed it, sealed in its envelope, in another envelope and had sent it on demand to Atherton by registered post. He had not even a draft copy. That Atherton had taken away with him from the office on the signing and witnessing of the will. Atherton was a strange man, jealously reticent as to his private affairs. He had watched the sealing of the executed instrument and had claimed every scrap of paper that had dealt with

it hitherto. The posting of the will to Atherton marked the end of his responsibility. As for his own legacy of two thousand pounds, he was perfectly willing to believe privately that it took the shape of the two one-thousand-pound Bank of England notes which he received anonymously. It might have come from any grateful client to whom he had, even unconsciously, done a great service. The will being lost, that he should be questioned on the point by Treasury counsel was unthinkable.

But there was the fortune, urged Buddy and Diana, the tainted fortune which, in the case of the will being presumed to have been destroyed by Atherton, would come to Buddy under the Intestates' Estates Acts. That, said Fry, was a matter of private conscience: one between a man and his Maker. He could only put forward the legal situation.

"And what," asked Buddy, "is the legal situation, when I have confessed to destroying the will?"

Edgar Fry didn't know. In the witness-box he could only swear to the vaguest impressions left on the mind of a solicitor in busy practice. He could swear to a legacy bequeathed to a woman whose death was the occasion of his return of the will; to an annuity to the servant, Bronson, and to the definite bequest of two thousand pounds to himself as executor. But as to the residue of the estate he could only state guardedly his impression that it was to be divided in some manner between the Conservative Party and the University of Cambridge for an endowment as to which he had no accurate recollection.

"And suppose you elect to give evidence on the contents of the will, Sir Brotherton, what can you say on oath?"

"Scarcely anything," said Buddy. "I took count of the two specific legacies to Bronson and yourself and

paid them. As to the residue, beyond the fact of the Conservative Party and the tomfool idea of a Platonic Academy, I'm far more vague than you are. So again I ask you what's going to happen to the money ? "

" I give it up," said Edgar Fry.

So did the firm of solicitors into whose hands Buddy put his affairs after his private talk with Fry, who, from a professional point of view, could not deal with them. And so did the Counsel whom this firm retained after the Great Decision had been made.

" You can't administer a will that doesn't exist," said Counsel. " Off-hand, I should say that eventually the Treasury will collar the lot."

After this first consultation Buddy and Diana walked through the Temple Gardens towards the Embankment.

" That's the best solution yet," said Diana. " The country has lost something through Atherton's intrigues —what we don't know. Anyhow, we'll come out of it with clean hands."

That was the basis of their faith in each other and in the future. Buddy would make full atonement for himself and his brother. Nothing should be concealed. When his offence was purged he could stand up proudly before his fellow-men, as a Man who had Done Something ; who, for an ideal of righteousness, had thrown away great riches.

" It would have smelt, it would have stunk, my dear," she said, with all her body and love clinging to him. " Every bit of bread would have been mouldy. Every bubble of champagne would have been full of poison. We should have come to hate each other and despise each other like the beastly people who spend their lives between night-clubs and the divorce courts. Oh, Buddy darling, we'll come out so clean, you and I."

In this, to Buddy, lay the ever-living wonder of her —her identification of herself in its vast and pure honesty with the dismal ineffectuality that he knew was Buddy Drake. In this, during the years to come, he was to find an ever-flowing fount both of solace and of inspiration.

Buddy was sentenced to five years' penal servitude.

Considering the manifold offences against the law, it was the least punishment, said the judge, that he could inflict. With the romantic aspects of the case he could have nothing to do. They could not blind justice to the fact that people who falsified death certificates, impersonated others, forged cheques, tore up wills, and, in such ways, deliberately broke the laws, must, if their misdoings came to light, take the inevitable consequences. He accepted to some slight extent the plea in mitigation that the prisoner had given himself up. He would therefore inflict the minimum sentence in his power. He said, in the dreadful calm, almost conversational way of judges:

"You will go to penal servitude for five years."

Buddy had expected it, perhaps more. It meant, with good conduct, three and a half years' imprisonment.

He bowed blindly to the wigged and red-robed judge, and, with a wan smile at Diana, turned and with the warders went down the steps from the dock.

On Counsel's application the Court allowed Lady Drake to see her husband before he was carried off to prison. She met Buddy in the cold, stark, barely furnished room below the upper stateliness of the Central Criminal Court. A warder stood by the door.

They held each other close. She whispered sobbing words of comfort. Then the great whisper of all:

"I've never told you. I've saved it up for this day. It may help both of us. There'll be a child for us . . . in April."

Buddy is still in prison. He has found an old acquaintance in the prison chaplain who had been attached to his battalion for some months during the War. A queer, fatalistic, unfearing chap who went about his work under an intensive bombardment, as though it were a silly Suffolk hailstorm; one of the stray parsonical birds who seem unable to make comfortable nests in the tree of the Church, but hop about on outer and precarious twigs. His official visits to Buddy are bright spots in his dreary and hopeless routine. He has not to minister ghostly consolation to Buddy. It is Buddy who sends him out of the cell with renewed hope.

"I can't quite get your point of view, Drake," he says. "You're going through hell."

Buddy acquiesces. But he tries to explain, in his tongue-tied English way, that nothing could be more magnificent than going through hell with a proud and defiant soul. It was the only path to a victorious exit.

A letter arrived from Diana announcing the birth of a son. They had agreed, if it were a son, to call him Michael, after Buddy's father. The padre came upon him reading the letter for the twentieth time. There were many things of new loveliness and fresh marvel in the letter. Buddy, in his hideous prison clothes, sprang to attention.

"Good morning, Drake."

"Good morning, sir."

The door of the cell clanged. The padre said:

"Well, how are things?" He smiled at the sight of Buddy's face. "They seem to be all right."

"All right?" cried Buddy exultantly, waving the

letter. "They're more than all right. I'll tell you what, my dear fellow, I wouldn't change places with any angel in heaven. I've got a son. Michael. Michael and All Angels. Think of it!"

There was a span of silence. The careworn, middle-aged padre, whose life had been one long unrewarded self-sacrifice, who had scoured the depths of human misery, stood away, with his head bowed. Then he lifted it, and Buddy saw his face irradiated by a smile of unforgettable wistfulness.

"At long last," he said, "it has pleased God to bless me with the sight of a happy man."

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